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BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

BUFFALO BILL'S DOZEN;

OR,



UPON HIS KNEES SILK-RIBBON SAM CRAWLED FROM BODY TO BODY.

Buffalo Bill's Dozen;

OR,

SILK-RIBBON SAM,

The Mad Rider of the Overland.

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

CHAPTER I.

THE RED-MEN.

WINDING along an Overland Trail a stage-coach drawn by six horses was climbing slowly a mountain, the scenery on all sides growing grander as the top of the ridge was neared.

At last the summit was reached, and the driver drew rein to rest his horses, at the same time gazing with admiration upon the superb view that met his vision; an admiration not diminished by the fact that he had seen that same broad expanse many and many a time before.

The face of this driver was a manly one, a beard of dark brown concealing the lower portion, and his hair hung in curling masses upon his broad shoulders.

He was dressed in black pants, top-boots, a fancy silk shirt with black scarf under the broad collar, knotted in sailor fashion, and wore upon his head a silver-embroidered Mexican sombrero.

A red silk sash was about his waist, half-concealing his belt of arms.

His eyes were large, tender in expression in repose, but could light up with a dangerous fire in excitement or danger.

Such was Silk-Ribbon Sam, a man known far and wide as the most reckless yet skillful driver of the Rocky Mountain Overland Trails.

Within the coach were several passengers, their faces at either window, as they gazed out upon the grand panorama.

"Come, ponies, we must move on," said Silk-Ribbon Sam, after a couple of minutes' rest, but hardly had the stage moved its length, when from behind boulders upon either side, and thickets ahead and in the rear, a withering fire was poured from the ambush.

Down dropped the six horses in their tracks; Silk-Ribbon Sam fell backward on the top of the stage and lay motionless, the blood streaming from a wound on his head, while from within the coach came wildest cries.

But still from the ambush rattled the death-shots, though no resistance was made.

There had come no stern command, so well known upon the border, of "Hands-up!" but, without it, the shots from ambush had leveled the horses, the driver, and were tearing into the stage-coach among the passengers.

Gradually the shrieks within the coach died away, as the fire from the ambush kept up a constant rattle, and then all was still as death, for death was present there on the hilltop.

Then over the top of a boulder peered a bunch of gay feathers, followed by the face of an Indian in full war-paint.

Satisfied with the silence that rested upon the scene, he stepped out into full view.

Another followed, then another and another, until thirteen painted forms stood in line!

Not one spoke, not a gesture was made; but they moved toward the stage-coach.

The doors were opened and the dead drawn out upon the ground.

There was a woman among those dead, and children, too!

No word was spoken, while one of the red fiends climbed up and glanced at the driver.

He seemed to be satisfied, for, after robbing him, he sprang down to join his comrades, who were rifling the bodies and the coach of booty.

There was something appalling in this silent robbery of the dead. Not a word was spoken, not a gesture was made, but the red band seemed to act as though each man was moved by the same thought and will.

From within the coach one took a small buckskin bag and silently passed it to a companion.

Another bag was taken out, and so on it went until twelve had been found, all the same size, and apparently possessing considerable weight.

Then the one who had no treasure-bag to carry walked away in the gathering gloom, and behind him came in single file his comrades, each bearing on his shoulder the booty, and over the ridge the silent red-men, the Mysterious Thirteen, passed out of sight, leaving the stage with its slain horses and passengers a ghastly spectacle for the rising moon to look upon.

Hardly had the last one of the Mysterious Red-men disappeared when the form of the driver, lying back on the top of the stage, as he had fallen, rose to a sitting posture.

He stretched forth his hands as though to grasp the empty air, then pressed them hard upon his head—as if to collect his scattered senses.

Then he rose to a standing position, gazed about him with a vacant stare, which suddenly changed into a look of horror.

With a spring he was upon the ground and stared upon the dead bodies of the slain like a man gone mad.

He rushed to the stage, sprung upon the step and leant within for a short moment, and then, springing again to the ground dropping upon his knees among the dead crawled from body to body—each to be gazed upon intently—an old man, an elderly woman, a young girl, a boy and a rough-faced borderman, and from his lips broke a cry such as only human lips can utter when reason flies, and, leaping to his feet he dashed down the mountain-side like a madman.

CHAPTER II.

TOO LATE!

SOME years before the scene of man's inhumanity to man related in the foregoing chapter, a person of striking appearance stood in a handsomely-furnished room of a country home among the mountains of New Hampshire.

He was gazing out of the window toward the setting sun, the last rays of which fell upon a coffin that rested on a bier in the center of the chamber.

Over the coffin was thrown in graceful folds a black velvet pall, but one end of it was drawn back so as to expose the face of the dead.

It was that of a man who had passed the meridian of life, and the countenance was hard and stern even with the seal of death upon it.

The one who stood by the window was a person of fine presence, scarcely over twenty-four, and with a strong-cut face, determined in expression and undeniably good-looking.

He had the appearance of one who had lived years over the twenty-four he owned to, like one who had mingled much with the world in spite of his youth.

Dressed in black, his suit was of stylish make and the best material; but there was an air of coquishness about him also, as he wore a diamond pin, a solitaire ring and a watch with massive chain of gold.

The look upon his face as he stood there by the window was not so much of sorrow for the dead as of triumph mingled with an expression almost of evil.

As he looked his eyes rested upon a magnificent scene of woodland, mountain, valley and meadow. Near the mansion, which was a roomy stone building erected in colonial days, was a sloping lawn, running to the highway that passed two hundred yards away.

A park of majestic trees formed a background, and the house, seemed little like the place from which men would go forth to lead a wild life upon the frontier and become heroes in the romantic history of the border.

Presently the eyes of the man fell upon a cloud of dust far up the mountain-side, and there dashed into view a stage-coach-and-four, fairly flying down the hill road.

Down the steep, winding mountain-road it came, without slackening pace, and sweeping along the valley highway that ran at the base of the hill on which the mansion was situated, rushed, at breakneck speed, toward the massive gateway leading into the grounds.

"There comes the coach, as I live, and two hours ahead of time!" said the man.

"Of course Duke has the reins, for no one else would be such a fool to drive at that speed."

"Hal! hal! he hopes to reach here before father dies; but, he is too late, too late."

"Heavens! how he drives! He will never round Breakneck Hill at that pace."

"Burt is a fool to risk his life with him; and the passengers? I only wish I could see their faces!"

"Hal! he has escaped with his neck, and no other man could have done it; but he is too late, drive as he may, and soon the double blow will fall upon him of father's death and his poverty, for it will be a blow, as I must do him the justice to say that he did love most fondly the one who lies there," and he pointed to the coffin.

"Ay, come on, Duke Marsden, come on with the daring rush that threatens death to you all on that coach; but you come too late, for the Honorable Mabrey Marsden is dead and you are not the heir to Mount Vista and its attendant riches! No! you are a beggar, a beggar, hal! hal! hal!" and the clinched fist was shaken toward the coming coach and the face of the speaker fairly writhed with hatred.

Suddenly the door opened and a woman in deepest black, and with long, trailing robe, swept into the room.

She shuddered as her eyes fell upon the bier, and passed around it at a distance to where the man stood.

Her face was as white as marble, and as beautiful as though chiseled out of it, while every feature was seemingly as hard in expression.

A woman of forty-five, she scarcely seemed over thirty, and her form was as willowy and graceful as a girl's.

"Mabrey, he is coming."

She laid her hand upon his arm as she spoke, and he, absorbed in the still wildly-dashing coach, had not heard her entrance, so uttered a cry of alarm and turned pale at her words.

"You startled me, mother, for I had not heard you enter the room," he said, with a shudder.

"Did you think he had risen from the dead,

and that it was he who touched you?" and she pointed with her shapely hand to the coffin.

"God forbid! but yonder comes that mad fool, and he has driven the three miles since he dashed into sight at Breakneck as rapidly as the horses can run."

"I saw the mad pace and knew that he had taken the reins from Burt. What if he should dash all to death?"

"Not he, for he has passed over the Devil's Back, around Dead Man's Ledge, and now down Breakneck Hill, with the same terrific speed; there is no fear now of his meeting with mishap. See him lash the horses, and in ten minutes more he will be in this room."

"And then?"

"He will have come too late, mother."

"And then?"

"When his first pang of grief is over, I will tell him all."

"It will be a bitter blow."

"Bitter indeed, and doubly so to him, for he loved father, and must mourn him as well as that he has been left a beggar."

"His anger will be terrible, Mabrey."

"We shall see, mother; but now go to your room and I will await him here."

"I have such a foreboding of evil, my son, a dread of I know not what."

"You are nervous from long watching. Go, and I will come to you after awhile."

He leant over and kissed the forehead, and obediently she glided from the room, again shunning the dead man in his coffin as far as she could.

When the door closed behind her the young man turned again to the window. The thunder of the hoofs and wheels now reached his ears, and the coach came flying along the highway, swaying wildly, until, with sudden pull it was drawn up at the gate of Mount Vista. Then the driver tossed the reins to one on the box with him, and, springing to the ground, walked rapidly toward the mansion, while the stage rolled on its way at a slow pace.

Strange to say not a soul met him, no one barred his way, and the next instant he threw open the door and stood in the presence of the dead.

"Too late!"

The words broke in a moan from his lips, and the man dropped on his knees by the coffin.

CHAPTER III.

A MAD RIDE.

A YOUNG man stood at a gambling-table, in an Eastern city, and the winnings raked over to him were up among the thousands.

A telegraph messenger entered the room and asked for "Mr. Marmaduke Marsden."

The young man was so engrossed in his playing that he failed to hear him, and the dealer at the faro bank receipted for the telegram and placed it upon the table.

The hours went by, with varied success, and then the young man began to lose.

Luck seemed to have changed, and he lost heavily, until but a thousand dollars of his winnings remained.

He was going to stake this upon the turn of a card, when a friend whispered in his ear:

"Had you not better look at your telegram, Marsden, for it may be urgent?"

"A telegram for me?" he asked, in surprise.

"Yes, it arrived over two hours ago."

"I called your attention to it, Mr. Marsden, but you seemed not to regard it as important," said the dealer, and he handed over the message.

Duke Marsden broke open the envelope, and his face turned livid as he read:

"Come at once. Father is dying! MABREY."

He pressed his hand upon his fevered brow, as though to collect his senses, and turned from the table.

His friend took up the money that was his and thrust it into his pocket, and then led him away.

"Bad news, Duke?"

"The worst."

"Where will you go?"

"To my rooms."

He spoke almost mechanically, and his friend led the way.

The cool air seemed to revive him, and he looked at his watch and hastened on.

"I have missed the evening train, so cannot leave before to-morrow morning."

He said no more, but hastened to his rooms, which were not far distant from the gambling-hell.

He packed-up his traps for a journey, and then began to pace the floor.

"Is there anything I can do for you, Duke?"

"No, Reagan; nothing."

"This telegram is from my brother and tells me to come at once, for my father is dying. He has not been well of late, and begged me not to leave him; but the accursed mania was upon me for a spree and to gamble, and I left him to come here and have my debauch out. Had I not been so wrapped up in the accursed cards, I would have noticed the telegram and could have

caught the night train for home; but now, alas! it is too late, I fear!"

"Is there no way that you could go around by other roads?"

"No; for I live twenty miles from the railroad and have to catch the stage at certain times that goes by Mount Vista. I will leave in the morning by the first train and can just catch the coach."

And he continued his walk to and fro.

Alfred Reagan soon after bade his friend good-by, and through the long hours of the night Marmaduke Marsden paced his room.

He lived over, in that long night, his past life. He recalled his kind-hearted father, who was completely under the influence of his mother.

He remembered his early boyhood, and how, because he and his brother could not agree, he had been sent on his travels under a tutor's charge and kept away for five years, until he was twenty.

Then he had returned for a while, to again be sent abroad, this time to a German university, while his brother dwelt at home, also under a tutor's care, but doing pretty much as he pleased and nominally acting as his father's secretary.

When twenty-three Marmaduke had again returned to Mount Vista, a thorough man of the world, young as he was, but possessed of a superior education and having traveled half over the globe.

His tutor had been a Frenchman, a soldier and a nobleman, broken down in morals and fortune, and had instructed him much more in what was evil than good.

Mrs. Marsden, stately, haughty and cold, had received her son with a very quiet welcome, while his brother, who was just starting off on a fox-hunt when Duke arrived, said, casually:

"Welcome home, Duke. I'm sorry you were not sooner, to go on the hunt, for if you have not forgotten how to ride you'd enjoy the sport. See you later."

And, springing into the saddle, he was gone. Duke's heart was full, for the reception of his brother was indifferent, that of his mother chilling; but his father greeted him warmly, with tear-dimmed eyes and quivering voice, and made him sit down and tell him all about himself.

The Marsdens were a very rich family, so the two sons were allowed a very generous income; but home was such a chilling place for the young traveler that he got him rooms and spent most of his time in the City of Boston, where his father came and passed days at a time with him.

His father and himself seemed in entire sympathy, and the son fairly idolized his indulgent, noble-minded parent.

But his wandering life, under a tutor such as he had had, and his life at a German university had led Duke Marsden into wild and extravagant ways, and he indulged himself fully in the passion he had for gambling, in which fortune generally favored him, though, sometimes, the fickle goddess would turn her back upon him and he would lose heavily, and, at such times it was a run down to Mount Vista and a call upon his father for funds, and never without a favorable response.

Upon one of these home-visits, Duke Marsden greatly distinguished himself, for, having been educated abroad and fond of fashionable attire, he was regarded by his mother and brother as an exquisite, though in his early boyhood no one had been a more reckless rider, driver and swimmer than he. He was an "inside passenger" in the stage that ran from the railroad town over the mountains to Mount Vista, having relinquished his seat to a young lady who wished to ride in the box with driver Burt.

Within the coach was the Reverend John Maxwell, the father of the young girl in question, who had preferred a ride on the box, and two others who dwelt in the valley near Mount Vista.

Kate Maxwell was handling the reins over the four spirited horses that drew the coach, when, just as the descent of the mountain was commenced, there came a loud crack and the heavy brakes snapped in twain.

The horses bounded forward in fright and began to dash down the winding mountain-road at a fearful speed.

In vain did driver Burt, having seized the reins, try to hold them, for they were mad with fright.

All knew their danger, for, a mile below, workmen were building a bridge across a narrow chasm.

In crossing the passengers would alight, the horses would be unhitched and the workmen would draw the coach over, and even with such care it was a dangerous adventure.

All realized that death stared them in the face.

Suddenly there came a fearful lurch; the stage reeled; there was a loud cry from Kate Maxwell and the driver had been hurled from the box to the bank upon one side of the road, but fortunately, in striving to save him the brave girl had grasped the reins from his hands, as he fell, though powerless to do more than hold them.

CHAPTER IV.

A COOL HEAD AND A STEADY HAND.

DUKE MARSDEN knew the mountain road as he did the grounds about Mount Vista, and was alive to the danger of their situation being trebly increased by the building of the bridge across Devil's Cut Chasm.

But he knew driver Burt was a king among the stage-coachmen who handled the reins on that wild road, and so sat calmly waiting until he felt the fearful lurch of the vehicle and heard the frightened cry of Kate Maxwell.

Looking out of the window he saw Burt lying helpless upon the bank. In an instant drawing himself through the window, he swung upon the box with remarkable skill and nerve.

"I will relieve you of the reins, Miss Maxwell," he said quietly.

She relinquished them readily, and said in a tone that showed she realized fully their danger:

"There is no hope for us, and poor Burt is killed."

"Not so bad as that, for I may be able to check them, and Burt is all right I guess, though perhaps badly bruised. Hold on with all your might!"

His perfect coolness reassured her. She glanced timidly at him and saw a face that was the perfection of feature, an attire that was faultless, and a certain air of command through all that surprised her.

Kate Maxwell was no ordinary girl. Her father was the rector of the country church near Mount Vista, in the little village of Phantom Falls, and had been there but a year.

He was a man of marked ability, and, for rest, had given up a fashionable city church for a country chapel.

Kate was his only daughter, had been reared in refinement, and had been a belle in the city in spite of her being scarcely eighteen.

Her father's position and her beauty had commanded instant recognition among the refined and rich families adjacent to Phantom Falls, and among her ardent admirers was Mabrey Marsden.

He was a handsome fellow, a splendid catch, a rough rider and great sportsman, so had given her an idea that his brother was a fop and wild kind of a person, who had greatly degenerated by reason of his life abroad.

She had merely met Duke Marsden, and when she found him a fellow-passenger on the stage-coach with her father and herself, who were returning from a visit to the city, she was glad to avoid him by riding upon the box with Burt.

Now as she regarded him she saw that the fop faded and the man showed himself as he really was.

Even in that appalling moment she thought that he was handsomer than his brother, and, if anything his form was finer and more athletic.

She saw him draw steadily on the reins, and his voice was cool and commanding as he spoke to the horses.

He placed his foot upon the brake, but saw that it was useless.

Then Kate Maxwell saw that the strength and skill of the driver swerved the horses from several obstructions which would have wrecked the stage to have struck them.

A short distance more and the bridge would be in sight. Seizing the stage-horn, the young driver sent loud, warning notes of their coming to the workmen.

Perhaps, after all, they might pass over in safety!

Once across there was an up grade, where the horses could be brought to a stop and all would be well.

Around the last bend they whirled with a force that raised the outside wheels from the ground, and then the bridge was in sight!

But the half-dozen workmen flew from the path of the coming team.

Then, with horror, Duke Marsden saw that in the center of the bridge a dozen of the planks were not yet down!

This could end but one way—in the death and destruction of all.

Sixty yards away was the bridge; so, what Duke Marsden did he did promptly.

"Quick, throw yourself flat upon the top of the stage and cling for your life!"

Kate hesitated.

"Obey me!"

It was an almost firm command and she obeyed. She grasped the railing and held for life as she lay flat upon the top of the coach.

She saw him brace himself hard, thrust his hand down to the side of the box, where Burt kept his revolver ready for emergencies of tramp or outlaw; then came one! two! rapid shots, a fearful lurching of the coach, wild snorts from the horses, and—the stage stopped so suddenly that Kate Maxwell was almost wrenched from her hold, and, but for her grip upon the side-bars would have been dashed upon the rocks, or among the struggling beasts.

To save the coach and passenger from going down through the bridge, the daring driver, with splendid skill, had shot his two leaders in the very nick of time.

Strong as he was it was hard for Duke Marsden to hold on, under the shock; but he did so, and leaping down called to the workmen to come to his aid.

Two were sent back up the road to fetch the driver, and the horses unhurt were cleared from the wreck, while the two animals belonging to the workmen's wagon, were pressed into service for the coach to go on its way.

All was done so quickly and so well, that Kate Maxwell and her father stood wondering at the master mind of one whom they had supposed from hearsay to be a spendthrift and useless member of humanity.

Burt was found with a broken leg, and brought down to the coach, where, at once the bone was set, skillfully and quickly by Duke; then he placed the patient comfortably within while he himself remounted the box.

"I am to ride with you, Mr. Marsden, am I not?" asked Kate.

"With pleasure if you wish, after your late experience."

"I do wish it, and I have no fear now."

There was more in the manner than the words, that caused Duke Marsden to give her a quick glance.

"I have not thanked you yet, so let me tell you now that I know I owe to you my life and the life of my father," she said, as the stage rolled on its way once more.

"You must not forget that I was looking out for Number One also," he said, with a smile.

"No, for a man of your strength and activity could have dropped from the boot and saved himself, but you remained to save us at the risk of your life. I shall never forget you, Mr. Marsden."

She said no more upon the subject, but he led the conversation into other channels, and she was surprised at his knowledge, wit and brilliant powers of conversation.

Surely this man had been maligned!

He drove the stage on to the village, helped her down when they reached the parsonage, and then sprung into the buggy, which he had ordered to be sent for him from Mount Vista, and that night, around the tea-table, told, with an air of the greatest modesty, of the thrilling adventure of the afternoon.

"The horses would have stopped all right at the bridge," said Mabrey, cuttingly.

"Oh yes, but it would have been at the bottom of the chasm under the bridge, a hundred feet below, and that was what I sought to avoid," was Duke's response.

"You will have to pay the stage company for shooting their two horses, for they will never be convinced that it was necessary," Mabrey retorted; but Mr. Marsden remarked significantly:

"Horses are cheaper than funerals, my son, and firm nerves and brave hearts are usually honored, not discredited."

CHAPTER V.

DISOWNED.

"WE are to have a fox-hunt to-day, Duke, and all the country are to be there. I am to escort Miss Maxwell, and she is to ride that new horse which father presented her with. I am sorry you have forgotten how to ride, for you might enjoy the sport."

"I will go, Mabrey, with pleasure."

"There's nothing that's fit for you to ride in the stable, unless you were to try Lucifer, and that is not to be thought of, as he is Satan's own horse; but I must be off."

And Mabrey arose from the breakfast-table and departed for the scene of sport.

Mr. Marsden and his wife soon followed in the carriage, leaving Duke to himself.

But Duke had heard that Kate Maxwell was to be there, and so he followed; and more, he rode Lucifer; but, worse still for Mabrey, the beast which no one else could ride found in Duke a master, and in the moment of what Mabrey deemed his triumph his brother dashed by, took a wall and ditch that none others dared attempt, and five minutes after gave to Miss Maxwell the brush of the fox!

From that day Mabrey Marsden hated his brother, and so unpleasant did he make it for Duke that the latter was glad to spend most of his time away from Mount Vista, and thus it was while he was absent in the city he received the dispatch to come at once, for his father was dying.

Long before the train started Duke Marsden was upon it, and arrived at the little town just in time to catch the stage for Mount Vista.

Burt was on the box and greeted the young man warmly, for he had never forgotten the runaway down the mountain road.

"Burt, my father is dying, and I must get to him. There are no other passengers, so let me drive, and if I kill your team or break your coach I will pay up in full."

"Here, buy a present for your little ones with this."

And Duke slipped a fifty-dollar bank-note into the driver's hand.

"Drive, by all means, Mister Duke. If there's any one can handle the ribbons better than me, you are the man."

Duke Marsden seized the reins and the horses were soon on a run.

At the relay, panting and covered with foam, they were exchanged for a fresh team, and Burt held his breath and he d on for dear life as the wild driver sent the four horses over the mountains as they had never gone before.

"Here, Burt, I don't think they are hurt. Good-by."

And he flung the reins to the driver, sprung from the box, and soon after stood in the presence of his dead father and fell upon his knees by the side of the coffin.

For some moments he remained thus, and then rising, said sternly:

"Mabrey, this was cruel, not to send me word in time."

"I sent you word in ample time, when we were assured that father could not live. You must have been delayed," responded Mabrey.

The words were uttered at random, but they cut deep, for Duke recalled the unopened telegram at the gaming-table.

He said nothing and his brother left the room.

When he returned an hour later, he found Duke still standing where he had left him, and the very picture of great, silent grief.

"The people are beginning to gather for the funeral, Duke, so you had better go to your room and prepare."

He glanced at his travel stained clothes and turned away, and, an hour after, in a suit of deep black, with a face that was colorless and stern, he stood by the grave into which his father's remains were lowered.

Then he returned to the desolate home and sought his room, seating himself by the window and gazing out into the gathering darkness.

"Your mother and brother wish to see you, Mr. Duke, in the library," said a servant breaking in upon his sad meditations.

"I will come at once," he replied, and he descended to the library.

The handsome room was brilliantly lighted, but yet it seemed filled with gloom.

In her deep widow's weeds Mrs. Marsden sat near the table shielding her face from the lamp with a paper, and Mabrey occupied his father's easy-chair and held a number of legal-looking documents in his hand.

"Duke, I sent for you, as the sooner a painful scene ends the better it will be for all of us, and I have much to tell you that has given mother and myself pain and will give you sorrow. Are you ready to hear what I have to say?"

"Certainly, though I suppose it is in regard to father's will, and I see no haste as to that."

"It does regard his will, and more, a confession that he made before he died."

"A confession?"

"Yes."

"What wrong had our noble father done that he was forced to make a confession upon his death-bed?"

"He had not done a wrong, exactly, but a kindness, and just what it was he made known. Can I read you what he has said, for it refers to you in particular?"

"To me?"

"Yes."

"I am ready to hear all that you have to say, Mabrey, and your looks, and the manner of my lady mother would lead me to fear that my father died with some bitterness in his heart toward me. Can this be possible?" and the face of the young man writhed with sorrow as he spoke.

"Not bitterness exactly, toward you, but justice toward others, for he held you guiltless of what had been done."

"Pray be more explicit, Mabrey," and the words were warmly uttered.

"I will be so, by reading this confession of my father, as follows:

"I, Mabrey Marsden, being as I believe upon my deathbed, do hereby make confession of an act of my past life which should now be known.

"When in my twenty-second year I loved a young girl, the daughter of a rich Southern planter, in whose family I was a tutor, and she returned my affection; but her father forced her into a marriage with an old planter, who was supposed to be enormously wealthy, the ceremony taking place while I was absent on a vacation.

"Three years after, while studying medicine in St. Louis, I was called to see a dying woman, and in her I recognized the one I had so dearly loved, and had lost.

"She was in the poorest circumstances. Her husband had died leaving her a beggar, her father had lost all in speculation and had taken his own life, and she had been supporting herself and child by taking in sewing until her health broke down.

"That night she died in my arms, and she willed her boy to my care as my own, and I had him baptized to bear her maiden name, Marmaduke, and gave him mine.

"I prospered in my affairs, inherited this estate at Mount Vista, and brought hither my wife, the mother of my real and only child, Mabrey.

"My wife believed, as I led her so to believe, that I had been secretly married, and that the little Marmaduke was my son.

"By my wife, Sophie, I received a large fortune to add to my own; but now, when death is before me, I cannot die with a lie upon my lips, and must disclose the fact that Marmaduke is not my son.

"I have done all in my power for his happiness,

have done my duty by him, and he has received from my bounty large sums of money which I really had no right to give to him, and this confession will explain why. In my will, I leave all of my wealth to my dear wife, Sophie, and to my much-loved son, Mabrey.

"To Marmaduke, whom I have also dearly loved, I give one thousand dollars, to be paid to him by Mabrey Marsden, who is to read to him this confession, and he has my deepest sympathy and hopes for a bright future, for he will doubtless carve out a fortune for himself in his own way.

"With my dying breath I say God bless him!"

"MABREY MARSDEN."

Such was the confession that Marmaduke Marsden heard, read by Mabrey in a distinct, slow tone, so that not a word missed the ear of the one for whom it was intended.

When the reading was finished the mother and son scarcely dared look at the man who had been hit so hard; but, to their surprise, he said, in a voice that was perfectly calm:

"Mabrey, you will please keep the thousand dollars referred to in that paper, as I shall not take it.

"For the fatherly love shown me by your father I am grateful, for he was ever good, kind and generous, and, as he says, many a thousand dollars of your money and yours, madam, have I had; but, thank God, I have a memoranda of all, and all, some day, shall be returned to you.

"From you, madam, I have had no motherly love; you knew the secret that I was a beggar's son, and from you, Mabrey, I never received any real brotherly affection, which would incline me to think you also knew the truth, for I have ever been kind to you, at least.

"The stage goes by at dawn, so I will have time to pack up and remove an incumbrance from Mount Vista.

"Madam and Mr. Marsden, I bid you both farewell."

He bowed low, his hand upon his heart, and left the room, neither uttering a word to stay him.

When the dawn came, Duke, the Disowned, as he bitterly called himself, mounted the coach as it came along, his traps found place on top, and, seated by the side of Burt, he turned his back upon Mount Vista, the home that he had deemed his own, as Mabrey Marsden's eldest son.

"Let me take the ribbons, Burt, for it will calm my soul," he said.

Burt saw only grief for his father's death in the words, but felt relieved to see that it was not to be another mad ride over the mountains.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SCOUT'S PLEDGE.

THE scene of my story is again transferred to the far frontier, not very many miles from where the stage-coach of Silk-Ribbon Sam was attacked by the Mysterious Red-men.

A coach rolled up to a station on the Overland, and from it sprang three men, all thoroughly armed, and were met by the station-agent with the air of one who addressed his superiors.

Seats were given them under the shed piazza, a tin basin, soap, fresh water and a towel were provided, and the agent said with a bow:

"Supper will be ready in half an hour, gentlemen, and I have a flask of prime juice ter coax up a appetite with."

"No soldiers have arrived yet, Ben?" asked one of the trio.

"No, sir, not yet; but I guesses they'll come in afore long."

As he spoke several horsemen appeared in sight, coming up the hill toward the station.

In the lead was an officer in uniform, and by his side rode a man clad in buckskin.

Behind these two came a sergeant, with a dozen cavalymen following him by twos.

"There comes Captain Carrol now, and what a splendid-looking fellow that is riding by his side!" said one of the trio on the piazza.

"Yer has a eye fer beauty, superintendent, for that feller are ther purtiest specimen o' man-critters in these parts, and he hev lately come hereabout as a scout, and they calls him Buffler Bill," explained the station-agent, Ben Long.

"Buffalo Bill! the famous scout?" cried Colonel Cassidy, the Overland superintendent, and he and his two comrades fastened their eyes upon the man in buckskin, who rode by the side of the army officer.

And he was just such a man as a novelist would select for a hero, a *beau-ideal* of romance and adventure.

Tall, broad-shouldered, straight as a soldier on duty, athletic and quick in his movements, he looked just what he was—a man of giant strength and Indian activity.

His face was a study for an artist, for the features were perfect, yet upon each and every one was the stamp of manhood, a look of indomitable nerve, and with a spirit to do and dare shining from the dark, piercing eyes.

His fine, silken-hair fell upon his shoulders, his broad-brimmed sombrero of grayish hue shaded his face, and his form was clad in buckskin, excepting that he wore cavalry boots coming above his knees.

Such was Buffalo Bill, when he rode up to the Overland station by the side of Captain Louis Carrol of the United States Army.

Colonel Cassidy—colonel by courtesy along the line—stepped forward and greeted the newcomers, with the remark:

"Glad to see you, Captain Carrol, and but half an hour behind us; but, let me introduce my friends."

His two companions were introduced, and then Captain Carrol said:

"Colonel Cassidy, let me present to you William Cody, chief of scouts at the fort, and better known as Buffalo Bill."

"I know you well by name, sir, and am happy to meet you, while I am glad that Captain Carrol has brought you with him, as your advice will be most valuable."

"Yes, Colonel Cassidy, when I received your letter by the Pony Rider, asking me to meet you here and telling of the fearful massacre in the mountains, I talked it over with Colonel Miles, and we decided that Buffalo Bill must come with me, as he is a power in border affairs."

"I wrote you, sir, as soon as I heard of this terrible affair of poor Silk-Ribbon Sam's coach, for I deemed it best to consult with you at once, and we are prepared to do all in our power to aid you in ferreting out these assassins."

"And the driver, whom you call Silk-Ribbon Sam?" quietly asked Buffalo Bill.

"Is the best man we have on the Overland; he can drive as no other man can that I ever saw; he is not afraid of anything, and I am only surprised that he was so completely taken at a disadvantage."

"Where is he?" asked Cody, having, by general consent to take the initiative in the questioning.

"Lying at the point of death from brain fever, caused by his wound."

"He was wounded then?"

"Yes, by a bullet that must have been fired from the ground, for it struck his forehead, glanced upward under the scalp and cut out at the top of the head."

"The bone is not fractured, but the shock was severe and the fiends must have believed him dead, or they would have killed him as they did the others."

"How many in all?"

"Four, an old man, elderly lady, girl and boy."

"All were killed?"

"All, and robbed, while, in his delirium, Silk-Ribbon Sam says that the coach was robbed of thirteen boxes of gold as well, but no treasure was sent out on that run that I can hear of, and, if it belonged to the passengers no one saw it put on."

"This is strange," Cody remarked.

"Yes; but Silk-Ribbon Sam continues to say, in his delirium:

"They took the gold, the thirteen boxes; they got it all, securely as it was hidden, those accursed robbers of the Overland; but, there shall come a reckoning—there must come a reckoning!"

"Such is his story, and he repeated it over and over again last night when I sat up with him."

"Does he say nothing more?"

"Nothing! he came rushing on foot into the station, his face stained with blood, and he shouted:

"Dead! all dead! the gold all gone! Murder! Murder!"

"We saw that he was in a high fever, sent for the surgeon, and put him to bed, while we sent a guard out over the line."

"The coach was found upon Big View Mountain, and the bodies of the passengers lying about, the wolves having already begun their work."

"The top of the stage was stained with blood, doubtless Silk-Ribbon Sam's."

"More could not be discovered. It was a clean sweep, but who by, Heaven only knows, and I hope, Captain Carrol, with your aid we can hunt these murderers off the face of the earth."

"All I can do I will do, Colonel Cassidy; but, Cody, what do you think of it?"

"I haven't thought yet, sir; but, who is this Silk-Ribbon Sam, Colonel Cassidy?"

"You have me there, Bill. He came on the line two years ago, and asked for a position as driver."

"Our driver had been shot by Indians, and Sam brought the coach in over a bad road, and the passengers were loud in his praise, so I gave him the place and have never regretted it."

"I asked his name and he said Sam, that was all."

"The drivers had a tournament soon after, and he entered for it and won the silk reins; and the boys therefore dubbed him Silk-Ribbon Sam."

"He is a splendid-looking fellow, gentlemanly in his manners, and I believe he has been reared a gentleman, though he always speaks with the strong dialect of the camps; but what do you say, Captain Carrol, is best to be done to find these murderers?"

And Colonel Cassidy again turned to Captain Carrol, who remarked:

"Put it in Cody's hands."
"Ah! but will you undertake the work, Mr. Cody?"

"I will ferret out the mystery, sir, and bring those devils to their just punishment," was the response of Buffalo Bill, uttered in a way that showed he meant to do just what he pledged himself to do.

CHAPTER VII.

KING VELVET, THE GAMBLER.

"SHANTY HEAVEN" was the name of the mining-camp, which the dwellers therein were pleased to call a town, and as far as the first word was concerned, it was correct, for it was but a group of shanties, while "Heaven" was the sublime of derision.

It was a bad place, and no wonder, for it was made up of the roughest element to be found on the border.

It was a camp of frontiersmen—some good men among them, but far more that were wicked, yes, desperately wicked characters.

The mines were panning out well, "dust" was plenty, liquor ditto, and orgies by day and night were the rule.

"Dying with boots on" was the fashion in Shanty Heaven, and no man, however brave, dared take an insult without "drawing to kill," for public opinion demanded a life for a life, and life was the cheapest thing to be had in the camps.

A collection of shanty cabins, a few stores, several alleged "hotels" and a score of combined bar and gambling saloons, comprised the town.

The element that was dangerous at all times was in the ascendant. There were some hard workers, many idlers and more who lived by gambling alone, winning the hard-earned metal dug by the industrious delver—but who, save in rare cases, failed to husband his earnings.

Into this town there came one night a man whose gray hair and beard indicated that he had passed three-score years, and yet a close look into his face would show that perhaps he was ten years younger; that sorrow, not time, had whitened his locks.

He was travel-stained, looked weary, and left untouched the supper given him at the so-called hotel, where he sought food and rest for man and beast.

"Landlord, do you know a man in these camps who answers to the name of Prince?" he asked in a dreary sort of way, as though he had asked the query until tired of it.

"Maybe you means King?" the landlord suggested.

"No, the man I mean is named Prince."

"Wal, Princes and Kings and Dooks is all one, I guesses, whar they is rich pussons; but here we has no Prince, only a King, and he's a King bee, and no mistake. We calls him King Velvet."

"King Velvet! what a strange name!" and the inquirer seemed to be interested.

"He's a strange pusson, pard, and no mistake."

"Who is he?"

"Wal, now I loses my grip, leastwise more than to say he's a gambler, and ther boss of 'em all at keerds."

"A skilled gambler? Describe him, please."

"Wal, he's pretty-featured enough to be a woman, with a figger like a city dancin'-master, and he wears nothin' but velvet, diamints and weepsons as has been used ter kill."

"Has he golden hair and a long, drooping mustache?" asked the stranger, eagerly.

"He has long yaller hair, but no mustache; but he's got a gal-like mouth, teeth thet a tiger might be proud of, and ther eye o' a devil, if it is blue as a violet."

"He has been here long?"

"Maybe six months, and the boys love him for keeps, 'cause he's good to the sick, helps ther poor, treats permisuous all 'round, and are quicker on ther shoot and kill than any man as ever got astray in this kentry."

"That is my man!"

Kitchen Tom, the landlord of the "Drink-and-Be Merry Hotel," fairly started at the deep voice of the stranger as he uttered these words, and gazed at him with renewed interest.

"Does yer know King Velvet, pard?" he asked.

"Yes! Where can I find him now?"

The tired look in the face of the stranger was gone, and his eyes fairly blazed in their brightness, which change Kitchen Tom at once noticed, and he said confidentially, as if in protest:

"Pard, is yer wantin' ter commit suicide?"

"No!"

"Thar is music in yer looks, and maybe yer is on ther war-path arter him?"

"I have hunted him for a long while, and, thank God, I have found him!"

"Has yer any prayers handy in yer grip, pard? Ef so, jist say 'em ef yer is goin' ter tackle King Velvet, for he am a powder magazine ter tackle and no mistake. I has seen ther match touched to him afore now, and I warns yer, for thar is fight in yer eye, I sees."

"Where can I find this man?"

The question was in a tone of command.

"At ther Golden Luck Saloon, down ther street a short way."

"Thank you," and the stranger turned away, when the landlord called out:

"I'll show yer, pard, fer I hain't ther pilgrim ter lose ther fun, which it will be when you tackles King Velvet."

The stranger made no objection, and the two went out together.

In the Golden Luck Saloon were gathered a motley crowd.

The fumes of tobacco-smoke and liquor filled the air, and the sound of a hundred voices, some in song, others in laughter, with a hum of general conversation, made up a perfect Bedlam.

A bar extended across one end of the room. It was very high and made of logs, as though the proprietor appreciated the advantage of a breastwork to protect him from danger.

There were bullet-marks enough in the logs to show that he had builded wisely.

Glasses were upon the bar, and bottles innumerable upon a shelf behind, low enough to be protected by the logs.

Three bartenders were kept busy waiting on the thirsty, and as at a dozen tables sat parties of gamblers, business was very brisk at the Golden Luck Saloon drinking counter when Kitchen Tom and his strange guest entered.

"Thar he be," said Kitchen Tom. "Are that your meat?" and he pointed to the further corner of the room where sat, at a table, rudely made into a faro-bank, the man whom he had spoken of as King Velvet.

He fully answered the description of the landlord of the "Drink-and-Be Merry Hotel," and looked out of place in that wild throng as he sat there, coolly dealing the cards, a cigar between his white teeth, and his broad-brimmed slouch hat put back on his head.

"That is my man," and the stranger advanced quickly toward the gamster.

"Braxton Prince, I have come to kill you!" and at the stranger's words King Velvet sprung to his feet while a hush like death fell upon all.

It was a moment of intense excitement, yet suppressed.

A man had come to kill King Velvet and openly avowed it!

There stood the stranger, ten feet from King Velvet, revolver in hand.

There stood King Velvet, one hand resting upon the faro bank, the other upon the butt of his revolver still in his belt.

And looking on in silence, except for their hard-drawn breath, was the motley crowd.

All eyes turned upon King Velvet.

Why had he not killed, as he could have done, the stranger, ere the words had left his lips?

None knew, but all saw that King Velvet did not fire.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE STRANGER'S REVENGE.

THE silence and suspense grew painful to all, for the stranger, who had given his warning, still did not carry out his threat.

Nor did King Velvet draw his revolver, though his hand was upon it.

He stood, gazing upon the old man as though he had seen a ghost.

Then it was King Velvet who broke the death-like, painful silence, for he said in a deep, firm voice:

"Kill me!"

The stranger's arm was raised slowly to a level and the muzzle covered the heart of the gambler.

Then came in a voice low, quivering, yet distinct:

"As you killed without mercy, so I will kill you, Braxton Prince!"

With the last word a sharp report rung out, and a groan broke from the lips of King Velvet as he fell heavily to the floor.

"Seize him! Kill him!"

"Hang him!"

"String him up!"

"Rope his neck, pards!"

Such were the cries heard on all sides, and the stranger never moved.

He stood calmly in the midst of the wrathful throng.

As they pressed upon him he called out:

"Men, in killing that man I have but done my duty, for he wrecked my home and happiness, drove my child to suicide and brought disgrace upon my name!"

This appeal, uttered as it was, had no effect, for several shots were fired, the stranger staggered backward, while several rushed forward, a lasso which one had conveniently near was thrown over his neck, and the cry arose:

"Hang him! Hang him!"

"No! comrades, you shall not touch him!"

All started at these bold words, and those nearest the stranger went down before his advance, while, suddenly, the daring man who had defied them sprung before the old stranger and faced the crowd, a revolver in each hand.

A splendid being he looked! He was unknown to all in Shanty Heaven, for, though he had been there a few days, he had held aloof from

all, and with guilty consciences to aid the suspicion, he was suspected as being one of the Rocky Mountain Detective League.

He had money, dressed well for the border, and, if armed, had never shown his weapons before that night.

Handsome he was, splendidly formed, and evidently a dangerous man to arouse.

"I says we'll hang him, for he has kilt ther Daisy o' Shanty Heaven!" cried a huge miner, ready for a fight.

"And I say this old man has told his story and had a right to kill the gambler. Touch him if you dare!"

The words were calmly uttered but their force was felt, and many were awed, for the brave stand alone of the stranger helped the detective idea immensely, and they feared that he had other support at hand, unknown to them.

All eyes turned upon Bad Bill, as the desperado was called.

He could not waver then; he must not back down or his prestige was gone.

"I touches him, and you dies ef yer interferes!" and with the words Bad Bill fired.

No one heard a second shot, but some saw two, and the desperado went down.

His pistol and the daring stranger's had exploded as one.

Bad Bill was dead, that was certain, and the stranger was untouched, but the one he protected had been hit by the bullet.

"You are wounded, sir; let me help you to the hotel."

Not a soul interfered, and Kitchen Tom rushed forward and also lent a hand.

The old man was suffering, but he bore up well, and soon reached the hotel.

There his protector examined his wound with the skill of one who understood surgery.

"Do you wish the truth, sir?"

"Yes, and I think I can guess it."

"You are mortally wounded!"

"I felt it, and thank God, I have met you, one in whom I can trust—nay, let me tell you what I have to tell, for my life's blood is ebbing fast, I know. Your name, please?"

"My name is Marmaduke."

"What are you?"

"A mere nobody, a wanderer, searching for fortune."

"Life has gone hard with you, perhaps?"

"I have met sorrows, but I shall work out my own destiny as best I can."

"Mr. Marmaduke, again I say thank God I have met you, for none but a noble, honest man could possess your face, and only the bravest would dare what you did to save me, a stranger."

"I am dying, and yet I had a mission to perform. Part of it I did in taking the life of Braxton Prince, the destroyer of my home and my happiness."

"I was driven to the frontier, like you, to seek a fortune. I found it, and then I found that Braxton Prince, whom I believed dead, yet lived. I left all to follow him, and the result you know."

"But there is one I would find—one I would leave wealth to, and that one you must seek for me."

"Share with that one the fortune I leave you, for it will be a fortune that will make you a very rich man, though you will have work to do to get it."

"But I have no claim upon your riches, my dear sir."

"You have the claim of having risked your life to save mine, the claim that you saved me from the gallows, and but for that desperado's shot would have saved me from death."

"I will die with my lips sealed unless you pledge yourself to become jointly my heir with that one of whom I spoke."

"Remember, there is work for you to do, ere you get the legacy!"

"Do you refuse a dying man, or do you obey my will?"

"I cannot refuse—I obey!"

"Heaven bless you, and now let me tell you that—"

He stopped, a spasm shook his frame, and the next instant he sunk back into the arms of the man who had defended him, a corpse.

"He is dead, and his lips are surely sealed. His secret is safe," and as he spoke the stranger's hand sought that of the dead man.

It had been thrust into his breast, and the fingers tightly clasped a roll of papers.

The Fortune-Hunter drew forth the papers, and the lifeless hand fell, as though its duty had been done.

Marmaduke glanced at these papers. One was a map, well-drawn, of some locality, and another was some written instructions.

A third was headed:

"In case of my death, the finder of these papers shall receive a fortune if he obeys my instructions as herein written, and may Heaven bless or curse him according to his fulfillment of the wishes of the dead."

Thrusting the papers into his pocket the Fortune-Hunter stepped to the door and called to the landlord.

Kitchen Tom at once appeared.

"He is dead."

"I told him he were a-foolin' with a powder-shop."

"Never mind what you told him, but get some one to dig a grave. I will pay all expenses and take charge of his effects at his request."

"I guesses he hain't got much, and ef he had nobody would dispute yer right, arter ther way yer turned Bad Bill's toes up to the stars, pard."

"Does yer think o' residin' in these parts?"

"No, I leave soon."

"I is sorry, fer you is a game bird, and maybe yer stay here would benefit ther town and fill up ther graveyard, which ther boys is mighty proud of, seein' as nobody has been planted thar yit as hadn't had his boots on when ther breath skipped him."

"A cheerful community, certainly; but, get some one to dig the grave and help me bury this poor man."

"Not now?"

"Yes, it's bright moonlight."

"Yer hain't goin' ter cheat ther boys out o' a buryin'?" asked Kitchen Tom, in amazement.

"I shall bury the man to night."

"The boys will be madder than a nest o' snakes."

"I am sorry to lacerate their tender feelings, but I shall do as I wish."

"It's funnier than a whole barrel o' monkeys to bury a man without givin' ther boys a whoop-up."

"Ah! I see that you are thinking of the honor of a funeral from your house. Well, you will profit more by keepin' quiet about it and doing as I tell you."

"I'll do it, pard," and the landlord left the room, but soon returned to report that he had arranged everything.

An hour after the body of the dead man was buried in a quiet spot outside of the well-filled cemetery of Shanty Heaven, and the next morning the town was surprised to learn that the man they believed to be a detective had left for parts unknown.

"He paid up like ther man he are, and then concluded ter travel," explained Kitchen Tom to those who asked about the two strangers, whom they now were certain had been detectives and allies, and this thought left an uneasy feeling among the guilty consciences of Shanty Heaven, and they were many.

CHAPTER IX.

THE PAPER TRAIL.

KITCHEN TOM had told the truth when he said that the stranger, who had killed Bad Bill had departed from the precincts of Shanty Heaven.

Having buried the man, whom he had so strangely met—consigning him to the grave with the beautiful burial service of the Episcopal Church, which he recited with a respect and feeling that touched the hard heart of even Kitchen Tom and those with him—the stranger returned to the hotel and paid his bill.

Then, leading the horse of the dead man, and mounting his own, he had ridden away from the camps in the early dawn.

He seemed to understand just which trail to take, and continued on for several hours, when he halted for rest and breakfast.

Then he took the papers out of his pocket, which he had found clutched in the hand of the dead man.

These he carefully looked over, studied the map earnestly, and, replacing them, mounted his horse and continued on his lonely trail.

The third day of his journey he crossed a well-marked trail.

"This is the track of the Overland stages," he decided, and at once dismounted, and again looked long and earnestly over the papers.

Finally, as though satisfied that he was on the right track, he followed the Overland Trail for several miles until he came to where it wound through a canyon.

At a certain point the canyon was entered by another, and leaving the big trail he branched off into the almost trackless pass, leading further into the mountains.

"There is the tree referred to, and now for the mark—yes, three wooden pegs driven into the north side, the height from the ground of a man's head on horseback! I am right!"

So saying he rode on once more, his eyes closely scanning the way. The canyon led him into the very depths of a mountain range, some five miles from the trail; but at length he halted and glanced about him.

"I have found the place. Now to see if the rest turns out as the instructions say."

He hitched his horses and went on foot into a dense pine thicket.

For an hour he was gone, but when he reappeared his face wore a bright look, as of triumph.

Mounting his horse and still leading the other, he retraced his way to the Overland and followed it for a couple of miles, when he came to a stage-coach station.

It was evidently a station at the end of a driver's "run," for one of those important personages sat in front of the station, off duty, charming half a dozen stablemen with the wisdom of his conversation.

As the stranger rode up he was greeted pleasantly, and the driver asked:

"Which way, pard?"

"Hunting work."

"What at?"

"Stage-driving."

"You kin drive?"

"Yes."

"Yer has ter know heaps ter drive in this kentry."

"So I see."

"Waal, I hain't boss, but we wants a good man on the lower line, so go out with me tomorrow, and see ther gov'nor, and I'll try yer on ther way so as I kin tell him ef yer kin pull ther ribbons."

"Thank you; I will go with pleasure and leave my horses here until I return, for if I don't get work I'll come back this way."

There was something about the stranger, his fine appearance, courteous manner and fearless look that won Driver Pete Doran and the others at once, and the more they saw of him the more they liked him.

The next day the stage from the Eastward rolled in, and Pete mounted the box for his Westward run of seventy-five miles over the worst and most dangerous part of the trail.

On this account relay stations were frequent, and thus were a relief to the coach-horses as well as a protection, in case of danger.

Pete had won the name of being the best and bravest driver on the Overland, and so many were the narrow escapes he had that the boys had called him Good-Luck Pete.

"I tell yer, pard, I doesn't want yer no ill-will, but I does wish yer'd offer ter drive my run fer me, as I wants ter levant East, seein' as I has saved up a snug sum o' dust and are calkulated to enjy life a leetle."

"I are fifty year old, hev been a-movin' westward with ther crowd fer thirty year, and has some kinfolk away back in York State as I wants ter see, an' ef I stays here it will be a bul-lit or a arrer in me, and toes turned up sure as shootin'."

"Then yer see, I hes had kinder presentiments, ef yer knows what them is, that I'd never git East, and so I wishes ter start while I kin."

"I will take your run if you wish to give it up, and they will let me have it," replied the stranger, promptly.

"Waal, I does give it up, and pretty suddint, too. It's a pleasant run, when thar hain't no road-agents ter jump yer, Injuns layin' fer yer, and it hain't a-stormin' like thunder on nights dark enough ter blind a cat, fer ther scenery are fu'st-class, ther critters is all able, and ther passengers is prime pilgrims now and then."

"The Indians do stir you up occasionally, though?" the stranger suggested, with a smile.

"Wal, they does, and ther road-agents chips in; too; then ther trail are thet bad no other durned fool than me will drive it o' nights, but ther pay are double, and I gets a lay-off each week o' two days and a night one time, and one day the next."

"All at this end of the line?"

"Yas, pard; but now let us see ef yer kin handle ther ribbons."

As Good-Luck Pete spoke he handed the "ribbons" to his companion.

The latter moved to Pete's seat, grasped the four lines firmly, swung his right foot over on the brake, and touched up the leaders in a style that startled Pete, the veteran, as much as it did the horses.

"Durnation! you hain't no tenderfoot on ther Overland," cried Pete, with admiration.

"I have driven before, but not in the Rockies," was the reply.

"Waal, you'll do, for I c'u'd jist go ter sleep with your hand on ther ribbons! Pard, yer does me proud, and I are glad ter know yer. Jist draw rein to a halt; put yer hand thar, pard, and we'll have a drink, for I has ther dockymints."

Good-Luck Pete grasped his companion's hand, drew a flask from his pocket and the drink was taken.

"Ter better acquaintance, pard, and more of it!"

"Anything the matter, driver?"

"Any Indians about?"

These queries came from passengers, who were nervous at the halting of the coach.

"Injuns be durned! It's a pale-face has captered me, and we is guzzlin' sperrits to better acquaintance—Oh Lord! Look-a-yonder, pard, for them is Injuns and no palaver!" and Good-Luck Pete pointed down a glen into which had suddenly dashed half a hundred mounted red-skins!

CHAPTER X.

FOR LIFE ON THE OVERLAND.

THE glance at the coming red-skins was sufficient to show Good-Luck Pete the danger to all on and in the coach.

The Indians evidently had been lying in wait for the coach, and had chosen a stretch of bad road where they knew the driver would have to go slow.

Pete at once seized one of two rifles which swung at his back by leathers, and said:

"You drive, pard, and I'll do ther shootin'."

"As you know the trail and I do not, you had better take the ribbons and let me try to keep them at bay, for I am something of a shot."

"Take ther gun, and I'll send ther critters along. Thar is two rifles, and I has some leetle guns, too," and the driver motioned to the holsters on the saddle-box, in which were two revolvers.

The stage was now dashing along at a rapid pace, and the passengers, badly frightened, had their heads out of the windows gazing alternately at the pursuing Indians and the flying horses.

Pete had spoken truly when he said his horses were fast, and the best on the line, for they showed wonderful speed and the Indians were not gaining as rapidly as they had expected.

"Thar's a piece o' trail ahead that we could fly over fer a mile or more, an' ef we kin reach it afore they comes up we kin gain fast enough ter reach ther station, whar ther boys will be ready, as they will hear ther firin'; but, jist here, we can't drive no faster."

"It is surprising how well you do drive here; but now, look out for that red-skin on the white horse," and, as he spoke, the stranger raised his rifle, steadied himself as well as he could, and catching aim, fired.

With the report the Indian referred to fell backward, waving his hands wildly, and tumbled to the ground.

A yell of rage broke from the Indians, while Pete, seeing by a quick glance over his shoulder the result of the shot, said admiringly:

"You shoots as well as yer drives, pard; but thar is more game ahind us."

The rifle was quickly reloaded and again fired, this time dropping a horse, and his rider was thrown heavily.

"It is easier to hit the horses, Pete, and it puts a rider out of the race," explained the stranger.

"Right you is, pard; but, they comes on a-hummin', so get ready ter dodge, fer thar comes ther arrers."

And, rapidly came the showers of arrows, striking the stage in many places, slightly wounding one of the horses and breaking a glass window in the coach.

The stranger never flinched, but fired steadily and never missed a horse, or a rider.

But the Indians were gaining steadily. They seemed determined to capture the stage, no matter what their losses were.

The coach was now full of arrows, the stranger had received a slight wound in the shoulder, and one of the passengers had been shot in the arm as he held his revolver out to fire back at the pursuers.

Then two of the horses had been wounded, and matters began to look dismal, for the good piece of trail Pete had spoken of was yet the eighth of a mile away, while the Indians were close behind and gaining.

Another shower of arrows came, and then a groan broke from the lips of Good-Luck Pete.

"Pard, my luck are gone."

"I waited too long—take ther ribbons, for I has got it hard!"

The stranger turned and grasped the ribbons from Good-Luck Pete, who he saw was badly wounded, and then turned his attention to the mad drive before him.

"My poor friend! I wish I could do something for you," he said.

"Don't mind me, pard, but send ther critters along like lightnin', fer yer has ther grit and narye ter drive ther devil," cried Pete, writhing in the agony of his wound.

With one hand the stranger made a quick turn of a lariat around Pete, so that he could not fall off, and calling to those inside the coach to fire quickly and to kill, he settled himself for the race for life over the Overland Trail.

Even in his agony Pete cried out in admiration at his superb driving, and said:

"A few more jumps and you'll strike ther good trail—jist round thet bend thar—and then you kin hump 'em."

Around the bend they went; the level, good road was reached; the whip fell quick, stinging upon the leaders, and the frightened brutes bounded forward at a pace that rapidly gained upon the Indians, who had received a temporary check from the passengers having fired a volley, as the stranger had directed, just as the bend was turned.

Poor Pete was suffering terribly, but he managed to give a yell of triumph, and the whip playing over the horses sounded like pistol-shots that sent them on at a madder pace.

The passengers, too, had gained courage and kept up a constant fire, so that the red-skins, after a short ride further, began to weaken, and, as several station-men, hearing the firing, came dashing into sight, in the distance, the pursuing band turned in flight.

Instantly the stranger slackened his pace.

"What yer doin', pard?"

"I wish to look to your wound, my friend, for I know something of surgery."

"Don't mind me, pard, but git on ter ther station."

"How far is it?"

"Two mile."

"All right! I will drive rapidly, and then we can care for you."

On went the horses once more; the horsemen were met and turned back with the coach, and, ten minutes after, the new driver dashed up to the station.

As he did so one of the wounded horses fell dead, and Pete said:

"I guess I'm a goner; but you is ther man fer my place. Boss, I interdooces yer to the best man I ever seen touch the ribbons and clean grit!"

"My friends, this brave fellow is badly wounded, so bear him to the cabin, and I will look after his wound," and the new driver sprung from the box and raised his sombrero at the cheer given him at the words of Pete.

But poor Pete was beyond aid, and the services of the stranger were needed for two of the passengers who had been wounded.

Their injuries were slight and soon cared for, and then, having his own wound dressed, he went again to the dying driver.

"Pard, I'm goin'; but you gits the old hearse and my run, for this is ther boss, who happened to be here inspectin'," said Pete, faintly, and he nodded toward a tall man who stood near.

"My brave fellow, my name is Cassidy. I am traveling inspector of the line, and you are welcome to Pete's coach if you wish it. We have to thank you for saving it to-day. We shall be friends, I know."

"I hopes so, sir, and I thanks yer," was the reply of the stranger, who suddenly dropped into the border dialect as naturally as though he had always spoken it, or was speaking it for a purpose.

CHAPTER XI.

SILK-RIBBON SAM.

THE news spread along the Overland, that a new man had come on as driver, and his achievement over Good-Luck Pete's run was in every mouth.

Who he was no one knew, and as it was said that he would be at what the drivers called a "ribbon match," all were anxious to see him.

He had entered upon his duties as driver at once, taking Good-Luck Pete's run, and had always come in on time. All passengers reported him splendid at the reins.

The tournament, or "ribbon match," was to be held at a point most convenient for the greatest number of drivers, and a fine new coach and plenty of horses, green and trained, were to be on hand to test the skill of the kings of the reins.

A purse had been made up by the Overland Company, giving a prize of one thousand dollars to the best man, half as much to the second, and a hundred to the third.

The one who took first prize was also to have the choice of any run on the road he might select.

The drivers had "chipped in" a few dollars each and had made the finest set of six-horse silk reins with silver buckles, that could be manufactured, and these were to go to the best man with the ribbons.

The Pony Riders along the line had gotten a superb gold-mounted whip, while the stablemen at the stations had bought a belt of magnificent revolvers and a rifle to go with the victor's coach. Then the landlords of the eating-stations along the road had clubbed together to get the triumphant driver a watch and chain, so that, altogether, the inducements were very great to be first man in the contest.

A large concourse of people gathered at the rendezvous, and the stages brought drivers in by the score.

At length the westward coach was seen rolling in rapidly, and the stranger was seen to hold the ribbons.

In regard to his name all that was known as to that was that he had told Colonel Cassidy to call him Sam.

If any other name had been entered on the company's books, no one had heard of it.

The drivers viewed the stranger critically. They could find no fault with his appearance, and he had the manners of a gentleman, a pleasant smile for every one.

The test soon began, for the men could not be long from their posts of duty. The spectators were wild with enthusiasm at the superb display of the different drivers.

Having been the last to enter, Sam had been the last to display his skill, and a silence fell upon all as he mounted the box.

His team was a vicious one, for the prior contestants had had the pick before him.

Could it be possible that he could outdrive the kings of the ribbons who had shown such marvelous skill?

Posts had been set close together, in a straight line and in a circle, leaving little space between the wheel-hubs on either side, and through these drivers had gone at a rapid pace, some of them without grazing.

On the inside of these posts Sam had had nailed strips of wood, narrowing the space to barely an inch on either side of the hubs of his coach!

All smiled incredulously, and yet he mounted

his box with no bravado, merely a look of confidence.

His team was an unruly one, so he wheeled them upon an open space, and in a few moments had mastered them, amid the wild applause of the lookers-on.

Then he started for the line of stakes at a trot and went through; but wheeling, he came back at a gallop and touched nothing!

Then he put his team of six horses at full speed, laid the lash on them, and went fairly flying through the narrow gantlet amid a breathless silence.

"He has not touched!" yelled the judges; and then at the circle of stakes the wonderful driver sent his horses still on a run.

"He has made it! He has made it!" the judges shouted, and all eyes were turned upon the driver as he cut a figure eight with the wheels of his stage.

"But they are away with him!"

The yell arose on all sides, as they beheld the six horses dashing suddenly toward the hills, only a few hundred yards away.

At the base of the hill was a deep ravine, across which had been thrown a stout but narrow bridge of logs. Over this the men were wont to lead the horses to the pasture in the hills, and a narrow shelf not seven feet wide wound around the hill, overhanging the canyon.

Certainly it was a fearful place for aught on wheels to venture, though horsemen had gone that way.

Every one believed the team to be running away, and wondered if the bold driver could check them before they reached the bridge.

"His holt is broken!" yelled one man.

"They're gone!" another cried. "All will be dashed to death!"

Such were the cries arising on all sides, but no rescue could be attempted.

The stranger must work out his own salvation or perish.

Nearer they came to the bridge, and the team slightly slackened their pace, when, to the horror of all, the driver laid his whip on them!

The leaders reached the bridge; the next instant all the team and the coach were on it, and a terrific shout broke from five hundred lips as the daring driver crossed in safety!

Then up the narrow ledge he wheeled, and all held their breath in suspense.

Around it the horses dashed and on out of sight in the glen above.

But only a moment was it out of sight, when almost a shriek came from the lips of brave men, as they saw the teams and coach reap-pear.

He had turned in the glen and was coming back.

Down the narrow ledge, with just good holding space beyond his wheels, he came, sending his horses along at a trot until he reached the narrowest part.

Here the daring driver reined in his team, waved his hat to the crowd in the valley, and to his ears came the cry:

"You have won the prize!"

Such a shout as went up from the crowd never had been heard in that valley before, while on came Sam at a trot down the ledge, across the narrow, quivering bridge, and then at a run for the home-stretch, passing around the circle of posts to show that he had not been in the least unnerved by his desperate risk.

Men sprung forward and wrung his hands as he leaped to the ground, and tears ran down bronzed cheeks as they praised him, while the prizes were presented by the judges of the test.

Then, as he had won their admiration, he now won their hearts by saying:

"Pards, we often has poor drivers as needs aid, so I puts up my prize-money in the hands of Colonel Cassidy as a fund to give them aid. T'other things I'll cling to."

"He's ther boss of 'em all!" cried a voice, as Silk-Ribbon Sam drove off to the run he had selected, which, to the surprise of all, was that which he had first driven, and held his silk reins over the backs of a spanking turn-out, drawing a new coach turned over to him by the superintendent.

In the box was his new gold-mounted whip; his rifle and revolvers were on hand for use, and his handsome gold watch and chain he wore.

From that day Silk-Ribbon Sam was the hero of the Overland Trail.

CHAPTER XII.

A SURPRISE.

THE reader can now understand something about the man who had won the name of Silk-Ribbon Sam, and who had so nearly met death on the mountain-top at the hands of the Mysterious Red-Men.

Such was the man that lay ill with brain-fever, and whom Buffalo Bill had decided to see, as a starting-point to unravel the mysteries of that fearful massacre.

Having pledged himself to the work, Buffalo Bill bade Captain Carrol and the soldiers goodbye, when they retired that night, and set off with Colonel Cassidy and his escort of two men, at dawn, the following morning, to go on the trail of the murderers.

It had been the intention of Colonel Cassidy to ask the aid of the soldiers, with whom and a party of his own men, and several of the Rocky Mountain Detective League, he hoped to run the outlaws to earth; but, after his talk with Captain Carrol and Cody, he had decided to leave it all in the hands of the famous scout.

The colonel had perfect confidence in Buffalo Bill, for he had long known him by reputation, though not personally acquainted with the man.

He had heard of him as a Pony Express rider, and his hair-breadth adventures, of his raids against road-agents and horse-raiders; and again, as a noted scout, guide and Indian fighter.

He knew how much he was dreaded by evil-doers, and he knew that no better man, in fact none so good as Buffalo Bill, could have been selected for the work to be done.

When they arrived at the station where Silk-Ribbon Sam lay ill, they found the hundred people composing the settlement considerably excited over the affair.

Another driver had been found to go through in the place of Silk-Ribbon Sam, but his coach had been attended by a guard of five men on horseback.

The station was more of a settlement than the other stage-stops, for there were, as has been said, about a hundred dwellers there.

There was a repair-shop for coaches, a harness store, grocery and a so-called tavern, with about a score of cabins.

To the tavern had Sam been taken and given the best room.

The landlord was a doctor, had practiced medicine in the East until he had fallen from grace from some cause which he kept to himself; then he had "skipped" West, mined for awhile, and at length he began to practice as man and horse doctor, as well as a landlord.

He had skill in his profession, though, and had taken fine care of the sick and wounded driver.

"Doctor Dunn, this is the great scout, Buffalo Bill. He may stop a short time with you, and wants to help you take care of your patient, who, by the way, I hope is improving," said Colonel Cassidy when they stopped at the tavern.

"Scout Cody, I am proud to meet you. Come in, sir, and consider this your home for life."

As to Silk-Ribbon, colonel, he is delirious yet, but he has less fever and his wound is doing well," announced the doctor, who was a pompous-looking little man whom the boys called "Pills," and also "Game-cock," either cognomen being appropriate.

"He has said nothing you can get a clew from, doctor?" the colonel asked.

"Not a word that I can understand. It's a bad case, Cody, for the poor fellow was wounded, just here on the head, the ball glancing upward and cutting out just here," and the doctor showed the places indicated.

"A pistol-shot?"

"No, a rifle-bullet made the wound."

"He was robbed?"

"Oh, yes, of a fine watch and chain, but of how much money I do not know."

"Do you know anything about him, doctor?"

"Nothing."

"Does any one that you know?"

"Well, here's one of the men from his station, who came to help rescue him, and he may know something."

The doctor called a young man who acted as stableman at the station where Silk-Ribbon Sam passed most of his time.

He answered to the name of Tips, and shook hands with the scout when introduced as though he deemed it the event of his life.

"Can you tell me anything about Silk-Ribbon Sam, Pard Tips?" asked Buffalo Bill, and Colonel Cassidy seemed surprised that the scout seemed to dwell so much upon what he could discover about the personality of the driver of the fatal coach.

"Waal, I kin, fer he are the whitest man I ever see in these parts, and game as a she-wolf," answered Tips.

"Do you know his name?"

"Silk-Ribbon Sam."

"Any other?"

"Lordy, hain't that enough, Mister Bill?"

"Where was he when not driving?"

"About Danger Station."

"So called, Cody, from the fact that the most dangerous part of the road begins there," explained Colonel Cassidy.

"He lived there?"

"Waal, he did, and we put him up a snug cabin and he paid us well for our trouble, and he sent and got furniture fer it, books, a guitar and weepins, and he was fixed for keeps, I kin tell yer, Mister Bill. He were a gent'man, every inch o' him."

"And he passed his time reading in his cabin when in camp?"

"No, he us't ter read o' nights, and often to us boys; but he had a couple o' fine critters, and he went off each day huntin', when he were at Danger Station."

"Did he get much game?"

"Waal, now I recommembers, he did not. He often come home without nothin', though he

were the dearest shot I ever seen, and when he raises a revolver it's ter kill— Oh Lordy, look t'ar, Cody!"

There stood Silk-Ribbon Sam, just as he had risen from his cot, his wounded head bound up, his face flushed with fever and his eyes glaring at the crowd.

But, worst of all, in each hand Silk-Ribbon Sam held a cocked revolver, and cried hoarsely:

"I have come to kill!"

CHAPTER XIII.

DEATH'S CHANCES.

THERE was not a man who saw the old man fire upon King Velvet that night in the Golden Luck Saloon but believed that he had killed him.

The bullet had been well-aimed; it entered the side of the gambler and he fell back into the arms of those nearest to him, apparently death-struck.

These had placed him on a bench, to watch future developments, and when the affair ended, with the death of Bad Bill and the carrying off of the old man by his brave defender, the crowd turned to excited debate.

It had been something out of the usual run and it had intensely interested the wild spirits present.

Seeing that his patrons were enjoying themselves once more as to their humor, Diamond Dick, the proprietor of the Golden Luck Saloon, called to one of his assistants and the body of King Velvet was quietly removed out of the door near where it lay and placed in an adjoining room on a cot.

When at last Diamond Dick passed through the room and retired to seek his own, dawn was breaking.

He stopped suddenly as he heard a sound.

"It is one of the boys snoring," he said; "but they are all up yet."

Again he heard the sound, and, brave as he was, he moved toward the door, for he remembered that he was in the room with the dead gambler.

He could just see, in the dim dawning light, the cot and the dark form stretched upon it.

Again he heard the sound.

It was a groan of pain. Quickly Dick threw open the door leading to the saloon.

The night-men were just going off duty, the day-men coming on, and there were a few late guzzlers and early morning toppers in the place, the former taking their night-caps, the latter their eye-openers.

Diamond's call brought help and a lamp.

There lay King Velvet upon the cot—and he was not dead!

His handsome velvet suit was soaked with blood, his face was white as death, he breathed heavily, but lived.

"By Heaven, he is not dead! Go for old Death's Head!" roared Dick, and a man started off at a run for the doctor of Shanty Heaven, who had won his title as much from his calling of physician, undertaker and grave-digger, as from the fact that he really had the cadaverous look of a skull.

Then, too, he had, in default of a sign, put up the skull of a banded horse-thief over the door of his office, and had stuck on either side of it a bottle with the label "medicine."

Whatever his rightful name, "Doctor Death's Head" suited the toughs of Shanty Heaven.

The doctor was on his way to the Golden Duck, for his "morning medicine," having been picking buckshot all night out of a Chinnee who had been caught stealing "washee" from a clothes-line.

The messenger hurried him along.

"Not dead, eh?"

"No, Doc."

"Been bleeding all night?"

"Yes, since he was shot."

"Guess he's gone; but it's worth much to save King Velvet, eh?"

"You bet, Doc!"

"Then I'll let others die and look to him."

"Well, he got it to kill," announced the doctor, as he looked at the wounded man; then he bent over him and felt his pulse.

"Save me and I'll pay you five thousand!"

It was in a faint whisper from the wounded man.

None heard it but the doctor, and he pretended not to hear it, but said aloud:

"A bad wound, but I intend to save him, Dick. I must have all my own way."

"Certainly, Doc."

"Have him brought on the cot, as he is, at once, to my cabin. It is the best in town, and he shall have my room while I sleep in the office. Lose no time. I will run on ahead to prepare."

The doctor's cabin was a comfortable one, and the gambler was soon in the best place obtainable in that wild land.

His wound was probed, the bullet cut out from the back, and all done that the really skillful man of surgery could do for his patient.

It was soon discovered that the strange old man had died at the "Drink-and-Be-Merry Inn," and that his defender had departed, where, no one knew, and no one cared to follow

to find out; but it was a disappointment to the citizens of Shanty Heaven to learn also that the stranger had been buried and they not present.

It was not such a bad day for funerals, after all, for Bad Bill was surely dead, had been laid out in fine style at his cabin, and would be "run in," as burying him was termed, that afternoon at four o'clock, with banjo and violin accompaniment, for it was the only band the camp could boast.

Bad Bill had been a terror, and his "record" called for a boss funeral; but it called for many who had feared him to attend, not as mourners, but to thank God that he had been cut off in his prime.

So "the terror" was borne to the grave with all the pomp and circumstance of Shanty Heaven's general turn-out. The procession was headed by a white violinist, a negro banjoist, and a Chinaman playing the triangle, and playing it for dear life, too, for he was kept to his work, and work it was, by a tall miner walking behind, with a grip on John's pigtail.

The corpse was borne on a board, stretched across two wheelbarrows, and was laid out in Bill's best clothes, so all could admire him, boots and all.

Behind the band and the body of Bad Bill came the citizens—a crowd it would have been difficult to match elsewhere in all the world.

Dr. Death's Head had left his patient sleeping, with Diamond Dick watching him, and officiated at the funeral, following the wheelbarrows dressed in black, with high hat and crape streamers, as was his wont when acting as sexton.

Having seen the body properly "run in," the doctor returned to his patient, and when questioned by Dick as to King Velvet's chances of recovery, answered:

"The chances death has are ninety-nine to one. I have that one chance to save him, and I'm going to win the game, Diamond, mark my words."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE GAME AGAINST HIM.

SIX long months passed away in Shanty Heaven before King Velvet was able to sit in front of the doctor's cabin on pleasant afternoons and enjoy the processions going by—the funeral of some poor wretch who had been killed the night before.

The fashion of "dying with boots on," had, in truth, become more common, and King Velvet was wont to see, daily, that his luck had not left him, hard as it had used him.

He was but a shadow of his former self; his eyes were deep-sunken, his face haggard, but the doctor had saved his life, and though the invalid had wasted away to almost a skeleton, the physician had given him hope of building up rapidly after the turning point.

He did begin to improve, and grew stronger week by week; but it was nearly a year after receiving his wound before he was able to ride about, and take long walks as had been his wont.

His first trip of this kind had been to the grave of the stranger who had shot him.

Kitchen Tom had looked after that, and upon a white cross at the head, King Velvet beheld a revolver skillfully cut into the wood, and beneath it this telling inscription:

"THE GRAVE OF A STRANGER.

"Kilt by Bad Bill in the Golden Luck Saloon

"(Diamond Dick, Proprietor),

"On the night of Sunday, October 1, 18—.

"Said stranger nigh done for King Velvet, and another stranger played trumps on the outfit and lit out.

"Erected by Kitchen Tom to the memory of a guest of the 'Drink-and-be-Merry Hotel,' Shanty Heaven.

"R. I. P."

King Velvet smiled in spite of himself at this, but only for an instant; then his face became dark and sad.

"And this is your end, poor old man! You were right; I was wrong; and for my life I could not have fired on you that night.

"I thought you dead, and yet now I know the rumor that you had been seen in the mines and had struck it rich, was true.

"This grave holds your secret; but where is your gold? That must be found, for it is mine!

"The man who defended you that night must know your secret, and if so, he has your gold.

"I must find out who he was, and then trail him, for it is worth the while, I am certain."

For a moment more Velvet stood gazing down at the grave in silence; then he said musingly:

"She is dead; yes, there can be no mistake about that; she is dead, and her death leaves all to me.

"Now to see Kitchen Tom."

He rode back down the glen to the tavern, muttering as he did so:

"I would give much to know who was his defender. He knew him, of course, though Doc says, they were strangers to each other; but, if so, why did he bury him—why not leave it for

others, and why make his grave where he did, away from the burying-ground of the camps?

"All this is a mystery that must be solved.

"I am ruined now, for it will take all I have to pay up. I must pay the doctor five thousand, for he saved me, and I have much more to pay, besides that.

"I'll start anew and lay up my winnings, and when I have what I need I'll strike the trail of the old man's friend, for there is a fortune at the other end of it, that is certain."

Arriving at the tavern, Velvet was greeted with a yell of delight by the crowd.

He "treated" the drinkers and thanked them in his courtly way for their good wishes, after which he called Kitchen Tom to one side.

"Tom, I wish to talk with you."

"I'm durned glad yer kin talk, King Velvet, for I thought as how yer never would ag'in."

"I'm weak, and must be careful, very careful; but I am improving steadily, and will be good as new in a few months more."

"I hopes it."

"Thank you; but now, Tom, tell me all you know about the two strangers who came here the night I was shot."

"One come some leetle time afore t'other, and war stopping here."

"Which one?"

"Why, thet big, handsome feller yer seen here one day, and you said as how he were ther boss man you hed set eyes on in many a long day."

"Ah, yes! I recall him now; but what did he sign himself on your books?"

"Sam Duke."

"I see, and he it was who defended the old stranger?"

"He were the feller."

"They were friends?"

"I guesses thar were somethin' atween 'em, though I doesn't know, fer sure."

"And the stranger's name?"

"I don't remember as I heer'd it; but, he come here and we was talkin' together, and hearin' your name he asked more questions than a Bible class teacher, and I seen he meant music, so went with him."

"You knows what happened, up to your bein' boxed, but yer didn't see thet stranger sail into Bad Bill and keep the boys at bay."

"He fetched the old man here, stayed with him until he passed in his chips, and then tuk his things, buried him decent, paid me up, mounted his horse, and with the old 'uns in lead lit out. I hain't seen him since."

"Which way did he go?"

"Down the valley trail."

"Thank you, Tom," and King Velvet returned to the doctor's cabin.

Several days later he paid the doctor in full, squared up all debts, and said to himself:

"I've got just a hundred dollars to build my fortune on—a hundred dollars and—my luck."

A month after, he again appeared at his far-table and began to gamble; but his luck seemed to have turned against him, for he lost his all and rode out of Shanty Heaven almost a beggar, to seek Fortune's favors elsewhere.

"A year of my life thrown away, and all gone! But I am again myself, so will not despair, for the future shall be mine, and Fate shall follow my will," he said, firmly, as he left the mining-camp behind and turned the head of his horse toward the setting sun.

CHAPTER XV.

THE SCOUT TRAILING.

AT the sudden appearance of Silk-Ribbon Sam, risen from his bed of fever and suffering, there was a hasty scattering.

Colonel Cassiday, Pills, the landlord-doctor, and Tips, cared little to face a madman.

But Buffalo Bill did not flinch. On the contrary he went straight toward the fever-crazed man and said, while he extended his hand:

"Why, Sam, how glad I am to see you! I am Buffalo Bill, you know."

This coolness and confidence saved the life of the scout, and of the others, for Sam hesitated as he glanced into Cody's face, as if trying to think sanely.

"Buffalo Bill! yes, he's a great scout, and I want him to help me."

"I will help you, Sam; so let us have a talk."

The driver allowed himself to be led back to the bed, and Buffalo Bill quietly took the pistols from him and laid them on the table.

Then he said:

"Lie down, Sam, while we talk, and I will call the doctor to give us both a nice drink."

The doctor then re-entered, for he had been expectantly at hand.

His face wore an anxious look, but he fixed two drinks, and the one the patient drank was a cooling one with a sedative in it.

The scout rattled on pleasantly, talking of various matters until Sam, overcome by the medicine, dropped into a deep sleep.

Instantly Pills sprung for the revolvers and all else that could be used as a dangerous weapon by the invalid.

He had been taught a lesson he would not soon forget for leaving his patient the means of doing harm.

"Well, Cody, what did you learn in your talk with him?" asked Colonel Cassiday.

"I learned but little, colonel, for he talked at random; but I will go up to Danger Station and look around, and begin work at once."

"Then I leave all in your hands, and if you need aid call on the men in the station nearest to you."

"This robbery and murder, I am sure, were planned beforehand, colonel, and I must get at a clue by finding out the motive for the massacre of all," replied the scout.

The colonel soon after bade the station farewell, and returned to his own post, leaving Buffalo Bill master of his own movements.

"Tips, do you know how to write?" asked the scout of the stable-boy.

"I do, sir."

"Well, you seem like a pretty good nurse, and I believe you will take good care of Silk Ribbon. Now I wish that everything he says you shall write down and keep it for me. I will give you a pencil and paper, and don't skip a word that you hear him say."

"I will ask the doctor to do the same, and any one else who may relieve you of duty, and in this way we may get at something which will give us a clue: but do not let any one, even here at the station, know what you are doing."

"I won't, sir; and I'll dot the whole chin-music down that I hears him sing, fer I kin do that same as well as Pills."

Having made his arrangements with the doctor to the same effect, Cody started for Danger Station.

The station boss, Nick Sawyer, greatly admired the well-known scout, so welcomed Buffalo Bill warmly.

Nick was an honest-faced fellow, who knew only his duty to his employers.

The scout showed his papers from Colonel Cassiday, to give him full freedom to do all he deemed best in his work of solving the mystery of the massacre, and the first request of Bill was to ask to see the cabin of Silk-Ribbon Sam; but Sawyer was unable to give him admission, as the driver had the key, and of course no one felt at liberty, while the owner still lived, of breaking the lock.

"The young man, Tips, told me that Sam was in the habit of taking daily hunts when he was off duty."

"Yes; he was always off in the mountains, somewhere."

"Which way did he generally go?"

"Down the trail."

The next day Cody mounted horse and started "down the trail."

He carefully examined the left of the trail as he advanced, for he went on foot, his horse following.

Not once did he glance to the right side of the trail, for he would return on that side.

At length, some five miles from the station, he came to a trail leading off from the Overland track.

It was just where the main trail crossed a small stream; but there was an evident trace of a track in the water up the stream.

He mounted his horse and followed, examining the banks carefully.

At length there came under his eye, several hundred yards from the crossing, a well-defined trail leading out of the stream.

A mile did the scout follow this trail, and at last came into a little canyon, through the center of which a small stream glided.

The entrance was not over fifty feet wide, and across it were stretched two ropes, as a barrier, and made fast to trees on either side.

Unfastening one of the ropes, the scout discovered that the canyon was used as a corral, or pasturage for a horse, for it abounded in grass and water, and there was no chance for an animal to escape from it when the ropes were up.

From the character and number of the tracks it must have been used for a long time, but being several acres in area one horse could find pasturage there for an unlimited time.

From this canyon ran several trails, showing that the horseman did not always go and come the same way.

One of these trails Cody followed back, and came out on the mountain over Danger Station.

The next day he again started out on the trail, and made a complete search of the canyon; but that the horseman had gone there other than to pasture his horse he could not discover.

On his return he took another of the trails and it brought him out in the valley opposite to the station.

The third day he rode one of Silk-Ribbon Sam's horses, and the animal, without a touch on the reins, took him to the pasture; but the search of the canyon, that day, was fruitless of results.

The fourth day he rode the driver's other horse. The animal did the same as his companion.

Splendid trailer that he was, Buffalo Bill could find no track of Silk-Ribbon Sam's away from the canyon, nor could he understand why he had made those pilgrimages there, continually.

"I must go to the scene of the massacre," he

decided, and the next day he started, accompanied by Nick Sawyer, for the scene of the Red-Men's fiendish crime.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE RED FEATHER.

BUFFALO BILL gazed with considerable interest over the trail which had been the run of Silk-Ribbon Sam.

He had been himself a Pony Express Rider when young, and, later, had driven a coach in the Rocky Mountains, so that he could appreciate the skill of the "Ribbon King," as Sam was often also called, in driving over such a trail by day and night.

Added to this was the fact that the run was often visited by Indians on a raid, and bands of road-agents were wont to strike different parts of the line from time to time, adding materially to the danger of that particular division of the Overland.

At length Bill and Sawyer reached the scene of the tragedy. The scout dismounted, hitched his horse and stood where the coach had, on that fatal day, taking in the situation.

For ten minutes he merely looked in silence. His eyes took in the grand sweep of scenery, and then fell upon objects nearer.

Here were the picked bones of the six stage-horses.

Over yonder beneath that tree were the graves of the passengers, and a head-board at each marked the name, as entered on the register of the coach-line, when they had started on their Westward journey.

"There is where the men were in ambush—behind those rocks in that thicket, yonder among those rocks on the right, here on the left under cover of those bushes, and in the rear under shelter of the hill, for the bullet-marks in the stage-coach showed that it was riddled from four quarters."

"Sam had evidently halted here to give his horses a breathing-spell after their long climb, and to let the passengers have a view of the scenery."

"The attacking-party knew of his coming and arranged accordingly."

"Now to see who were killed."

So saying, he walked over to the graves, five in number, and taking out pencil and note-book wrote what was on each head-board.

First was a grave marked:

"ANDREW COVERLEY."

"Took seat Green Hill—booked to end of line. Baggage robbed, no other clue. Same as others. Massacred on this spot."

The next was:

"MARY SAUNDERS."

"Took seat Green Hill—booked to end of line."

The third was marked simply:

"UNKNOWN BOY."

Aged 12."

The fourth was:

"LULU LENNOX."

"Girl of 13—under care of Andrew Coverley and Mary Saunders."

The fifth was:

"UNKNOWN BORDERMAN."

Such was the record of that mountain tragedy, and as the baggage of those slain had been taken or destroyed, more could not be discovered regarding them.

It certainly was a puzzle to solve, as to whether there had been a motive for killing these five people other than for booty.

What brought that man, woman and little girl West, and what were they to each other?

Who was the unknown boy of twelve years of age?

Who was the unknown borderman, and what had he to do with the others?

The scout pondered over all of these things, but said nothing; then he began to look about for "signs."

Who had perpetrated this red work?

It had the look of having been done for an object other than mere plunder, for why had all been, as the murderers supposed, slaughtered?

There was one survivor, but his brain was now wild with delirium. Would he die with the secret untold?

He alone, apparently, could clear up the mystery, unless one of the murderers came forward and confessed.

The trail was an old one, and yet Buffalo Bill started out to find how the Red-Men had come to the mountain, and how they had left it.

He went to work systematically, and with the patience of the Indian.

Nick Sawyer was forced to go back to his station, so he left the trail-hunter there alone.

Cody sought a camping-place not far away, staked out his horse and then set to work.

The west-bound coach passed the second day of his stay, with a new driver in place of Silk-Ribbon Sam. He handled the reins well, but looked nervous.

He halted for the passengers, for the coach was full, to see the scene of the mysterious massacre, and they appeared to be equally as much interested in the tall form and handsome

face of the scout, who, the driver told them, had come there to trail the mystery to the end.

As day travel alone was allowed, on that part of the line, since the massacre, the driver waved adieu to Buffalo Bill and drove on, for he had no desire for night to catch him between two stations.

Cody continued his trailing until, suddenly, he stopped and picked up a feather.

It was a feather of crimson hue, an ostrich plume in fact, and at the end was a clasp, or small gold pin of unique design, representing a hand holding the four aces of a pack of cards!

The catch had been broken off, and this accounted for the dropping of the feather by the wearer, whoever that wearer had been.

Buffalo Bill gazed long at the feather and the pin.

On the reverse side of the latter were two letters, which the scout wrote down in his note-book, and then placed the red feather and the pin away in his saddle-pocket and went on once more, trailing the almost obliterated track left by the assassins on their retreat.

He continued on this trail until nightfall, and then camped on it.

The next day he resumed his search, and late in the afternoon reached a broad trail that led up into a bold range of mountains.

Any other man could scarcely have followed that indistinct trail, for it was left by human feet, not hoofs; but Buffalo Bill did not give it up, and with the instinct of an Indian and the imagination and skill of an intelligent man, he had held on his way, each time when at fault again finding the track he sought.

When at last he saw whither it led, he seemed to be satisfied on some point, for he boldly mounted his horse and rode leisurely away.

The next morning he rode into a frontier fort and a cheer from the soldiers and scouts greeted him.

He put up his horse and went straight to the quarters of the commandant, Captain Carrol.

CHAPTER XVII.

BORDER DETECTIVES.

CAPTAIN CARROL greeted the chief of scouts warmly.

"What, Bill, back so soon from your detective work?"

"I'll tell you just what I have done, captain, and it seems to me as though my work was just begun," and the scout told the story up to the time of his finding the red feather. He placed his note-book before the officer, open at the names of the people who were slain in the stage-coach.

"Now, Captain Carrol, from the manner in which the attack and murders were carried out, many have believed that Indians were at the bottom of it; but from the first I had an idea that it was the work of white men."

"Now, no Indian had this feather and pin, that is certain; still, the murderers' did not go to the scene on horseback, but on foot, which does not look as though they were white men, for white men would not walk as a general thing."

"They yet could have had only a motive to kill, as Colonel Cassiday says there was no treasure sent through that day, unless the passengers had a treasure which these murderers knew of."

"That may have been, Cody, and an ally must have been along with the coach," said Captain Carrol, who was deeply interested in the scout's story.

"Yet the books show only the five passengers."

"The borderman might have been the spy."

"If so, they killed him, for he was found dead among the rest."

"True; but go on with your story, for I have every confidence that you can ferret this out, for you are a natural-born detective, Bill."

"Thank you, sir. I followed the trail for sixty miles, until it led up into the Wild Range, and there I left it."

"Lost it?"

"Oh no; for it had become broader, no pains having been taken to conceal it from a follower, as had been the case up to that time."

"Well?"

"I then branched off and came here to report."

"Not to give it up, I hope?"

"Certainly not, sir; to give up is not my nature; but my tracking them to the Wild Range shows that they must have their rendezvous there."

"There are hostile Indians there, too."

"Yes, sir, and it is the retreat of the Red Riders, too."

"Ha! of that band of road-agents that every now and then strike the Overland coaches upon some of their trails?"

"Yes, sir, for you know the Red Riders' trails have always led from the scene of their devilry to the vicinity of the Wild Range."

"And yet, not a soul has ever been able to trace this band to its retreat, further than that they have a refuge in these mountains, where it would take a regiment to capture a dozen men."

"It is my intention, Captain Carrol, to now undertake the work of finding out these daring men, and, with the aid of a few of my scouts, turned into detectives, I believe I can do it."

"I fear you are going to take too great a risk upon yourself, Cody."

"All life here is a risk, and besides, it may help us to discover the mystery regarding the young lady whose life I saved some months ago and whose strange disappearance from the fort not one of us could account for."

"True, that has always worried me, Cody, as I know it has you. But, what is your plan?"

"I will tell you, sir, for I need all the aid you can give me."

"You have a deserter in the guard-house—a soldier, who is not unlike me in appearance."

"Yes."

"Now, I would like you to have him secretly removed by night, under a guard of two of my scouts, and taken to another fort, there to be secretly confined in prison; then let the report get out that he has escaped, and offer a reward for him, dead or alive."

"I cannot see your plan, Cody."

"You soon will, sir. I will shave off my hair, mustache and imperial, dress in the deserter's uniform, and make my way to the Wild Range as though seeking refuge among the Indians or road-agents, whichever I come up with first."

"I knew you meant to take some terrible risk."

"Oh, no, sir; for I'll be thought to be Dave Dawson, the deserter, you know. I'll hang about the trail for some time, and I wish some of my men to take passage on each stage-coach, West and East, for the next two weeks, and report to me all on the coaches and all that takes place."

"They can do so, with their experience, and when it is done, Surgeon Powell I know will bring it to me at a place I will appoint to meet him."

"This may be all useless, and yet it may pan out something of great value."

"Then I will go on my hunt for the retreat of the Red Riders, and see what I can discover."

"I don't like this risk, Cody, I frankly confess."

"I think you exaggerate the danger to me, sir."

"Not at all; I fear you do not see how great the danger really will be."

"A life's a life, sir, and one in my calling must risk it daily."

"I wish, then, Captain Carrol, to detail twelve men, and ask Surgeon Powell to have charge of them. I will take mostly my own men, but I want also your brave negro servant, Kansas, and Captain Taylor's faithful Chinnee, Buckskin, with four soldiers and six of my own picked scouts."

"These are to be ready to come to my aid when I need them, either singly or all together, for my intention is to make a band of detectives of them, and thus ferret out the lawless men that are a curse to the border."

"By so doing, Captain Carrol, we can rid the Overland of these road-agents, and the settlements of horse-thieves and marauders."

"It would be a great blessing, Cody, and I will give you all the aid in my power to accomplish the good work, while Surgeon Powell is a tower of strength in himself, and will give you the aid you ask, for you are like brothers."

"When does he return, sir?"

"He went off on a scout for me, in your absence, and I expect him back at any time."

"If it is Frank Powell you are speaking of, he is here," and into the room stepped a tall, splendid-looking man, wearing the uniform fatigues of an army surgeon, but with buckskin leggings stuck in top-boots, and a slouch hat encircled by a gold cord.

It was Surgeon Frank Powell, one who, not content with winning fame in his profession, also gained it as a scout and Indian-fighter, and who is known to-day as the "Border Brother of Buffalo Bill"—the "Surgeon Scout"—"Wizard Medicine-Man," and "Fancy Frank."

"Sit down, Powell, for we were just speaking of you. Bill, here, requires your aid," said Captain Carrol.

"Thanks, captain, and let me report that in my three days' scout I saw but one Indian—here's his scalp—for we had a duel at long range, he taking first shot, and there were no signs of comrades near him."

"Now Bill, old fellow, what is it?" and the Surgeon Scout tossed the red-skin's scalp over on the captain's table.

"I've turned detective, Frank, and need some allies, so I've asked for you, four soldiers, six of my men, and Kansas, the captain's servant, and Buckskin, Captain Taylor's Chinnee."

"What such a dozen can't find out, Bill, with you as chief, won't be worth knowing," remarked Powell, laughing.

"I want men whom no one will suspect, and yet who can do their work well, when thrown into any position."

"You will have to go and take charge of that poor wounded driver, Silk Ribbon Sam, and the others are to leave their posts along

the Overland, and report everything to you, and I'll find a way for you to communicate with me."

"If I need my scout-detectives, mounted and ready for work, I know you can come to me with them on short notice."

"I'll do it, Bill, and luck be with you in solving the mystery of that stage-coach murder-case, which Captain Carrol told me all about; but, when do you start?"

"As soon as I have picked my men and let them know just what is to be done," was the reply.

At midnight Cody made his arrangements, and slipped out of camp in the uniform of a soldier. With his long hair cut close to his head, and his face beardless, no one would have recognized the noted scout, for he had sacrificed beauty to duty, and had started upon a trail that was beset with the greatest dangers.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE MAD DRIVER.

TIPS was a good nurse and attended devotedly to his work—that of caring for the wounded and very sick Silk-Ribbon Sam.

He had formed a great attachment for the strange man, as had all others who had come in contact with him at the station. In spite of his border way of speaking, they all felt that he was their superior and had an eventful history, if that history were but known.

He had sent East, by the coaches, for books and many other things, that showed his refined taste, and his little cabin had not the appearance within of a border home.

The man had been a mystery to all on the Overland from the day of his coming, and many connected this mystery with the massacre of those in his coach.

As the days passed the fever began to abate, and Doctor Dunn, landlord, physician and boss of the station, decided that the patient would recover.

In his delirium he had uttered many things, which Tips had religiously written down.

A leaf from the book the nurse had kept of the wandering mind finding utterance in words was strange reading, for in it occurred these apparently incoherent sentences:

"No, no, he would have told me—he would not have kept me in secret—then cast me off—"

"Trickery! yes—guilty?"

"Both of them, your Honor—the woman as well as the man."

"Crime! do not breathe it here—wait!"

"She did love me, but another will win and wear her—that other my— No! no! he is not kindred of mine!"

"I would cut my veins open and let out the blood if it was the same as his—yes—and hers!"

"A gambler! oh, yes—very bad!"

"Too late! too late! I have myself to blame."

"I fled, and why? God knows best!"

"Who am I? I dare not tell."

"What am I? A gentleman—no, I forget, a wanderer, a vagabond—no, no, I forget. I am Silk-Ribbon Sam, the Mad Driver of the Rockies."

"I guess I am mad—ha! all dead! the treasure gone!"

"I saw them as they fired!"

"Red faces! red forms! with red feathers—all were red, and blood is red."

"God! I recall no more!"

"Ha! yes, I remember now."

"My horses shot down! my people dead, my treasure gone!"

"Yes, I guess I am mad; but I can drive, I can kill, I can avenge—ha! ha! ha!"

Such was a page record of the driver's ravings, and with slight changes they were repeated day and night. According to Buffalo Bill's instructions the watchers wrote all down, skipping no word, for much might hang on a word.

Days passed and at length the fever left the patient. He seemed much better, ate well, but said nothing.

"My God! I fear his reason is gone," cried the doctor one day, as he looked at the man, who seemed unconscious of his presence.

When spoken to, Sam promptly replied, if questioned as to how he felt, or what he wished to eat; but if asked about the massacre he looked the questioner squarely in the face and remained silent.

He improved daily, gained in strength, and finally moved about in a quiet way.

One night Tips, who slept in the room with him, was not disturbed in his slumber by any sound, but in the morning he awoke with a start, for the driver was gone!

Tips gave the alarm, and search was at once begun, but it was fruitless. Sam had dressed himself, carried with him his weapons and had departed.

The wholesettlement turned out in the search, and yet not a trace of him could be found.

"The poor fellow is mad, gone clean mad, and God knows what will happen to him, or what he may do," was the doctor's heartfelt exclamation.

Having lost his patient, Tips determined to

return to Danger Station and report to Nick Sawyer that the head driver was gone.

As he was riding along the trail he saw a horseman approaching.

He drew rein, for those were hazardous times, and it behooved all lone riders to be on guard.

The horseman was splendidly mounted, sat his horse like a Comanche, and wore a semi-uniform, half buckskin suit, while upon his broad shoulders were straps, denoting an army officer's rank.

Tips felt reassured and moved on, the stranger not having stopped at all.

As he drew near, the stranger said, politely:

"Good-day, my friend!"

"Can you tell me how far it is to the stage-station?"

"Seven miles by the trail, sir."

"Thank you, and perhaps you are from there?"

"Just lit out a hour ago."

"Is there a wounded stage-driver there by the name of Silk Ribbon Sam?"

"There were until last night, but he skipt off last night."

"Died?"

"Nary! He jest lit out."

"Pray tell me all about him, for I am an army surgeon sent to look after him. I am Surgeon Frank Powell."

"Lordy! I has heerd of yer, Pard Doctor, as who hain't."

"You is no slouch, but a man from 'way up, and I'm as tickled to meet yer as though I'd swallowed a feather."

Frank Powell said the pleasure was reciprocated, heard the story of the Mad Driver, and turned back with Tips for Danger Station.

Arriving there Surgeon Powell was presented to Nick Sawyer, and the news told to all that Silk Ribbon Sam, as mad as a wolf, had eluded all watching, and had gone, no one knew where, and carried with him his belt of arms.

"You are sure he was mad?" asked Powell, addressing Tips.

"I guesses he were, for not a word would he say but 'yes' an' 'no,' and ef yer axed him about ther massacre, he did give yer a look out o' his eyes that made yer uncomfortable."

"Old Pills said as how he was mad as a March hare, whatever that means."

"And who is Pills?" asked Powell, with a smile.

Tips had just explained that "Pills" was Doctor Dunn, landlord and agent, when Nick Sawyer called out:

"There comes the coach, and on time for the first time since Sam quit driving. Buck Riley's improving."

"And he's a-comin' fer all he's worth, as Sam ust ter come," Tips added.

"Lordy! jist hear that horn wind! Hain't it like Sam's way?" cried one of the men, as the sound of a horn was heard ringing down the mountain pass.

"There she comes!" cried several voices, and the stage-coach, drawn by six horses, rolled into view, coming along at a slapping pace.

Then there broke forth from all a cry of horror, for on the box they recognized the Mad Driver, Silk-Ribbon Sam!

CHAPTER XIX.

BROUGHT TO BAY.

BUCK RILEY was one of the best drivers on the Overland, but he, like all the rest, excepting Silk-Ribbon Sam, had spurned the piece of road beyond Danger Station.

It was a bad road by day, and by night it was a desperate drive.

But Sam had driven it without accident until the day of the fatal scene on the mountain-top.

Then Buck Riley, when volunteers were called for to take the coach over that run, had reluctantly said that he would drive, if it was arranged to make it all by daylight.

He was given the coach on these terms, and went to work, the change making several hours' difference in the time, but this could not be helped under the circumstances.

Buck had a stage full of passengers going Eastward.

He was jogging along the trail at a slow pace when they came to the mountain road, and the horses began to climb.

Buck Riley was fond of talking, and he generally got some one to ride on the box with him when he could; but no passengers cared to ride there through that piece of road.

They preferred to take the chances within of being shot.

When Buck got to the mountain, on the summit of which the massacre had occurred, he intended to give his passengers a treat.

He wished them to see the fine view, and then to tell them of the sad killing of those in the stage-coach, and how the poor driver had been wounded and gone mad.

Buck had all in his mind just what he was going to say, and was drawing rein upon the mountain-top, when suddenly, out from behind the large tree where were the graves of the dead, stepped a tall form.

He held a rifle in his hand, and it was leveled at Buck Riley.

"Halt!"

The word rung out as sternly as though given to a regiment in battle.

Buck Riley obeyed with an alacrity that was amusing, while from his lips broke the words:

"The Mad Driver, sure as death!"

"Make your brake fast, throw your reins over the lantern and dismount."

The passengers were in dire alarm.

Of course in their minds road-agents had stopped the coach.

One or two men who had been talking about what they would do, if attacked, now turned white and slunk back in their seats.

No one seemed to have courage to look out of the windows, and, brought to bay as he was, Buck Riley was more than anxious to obey the commands given him.

He got down with considerable haste, after having made his brake fast and thrown the ends of the reins over the lantern.

But he got down on the opposite side to the Mad Driver.

The latter walked quickly to the coach, sprung upon the box, took his seat, and paying no more attention to Buck Riley, drove on.

Poor Buck had taken refuge behind a bowlder and saw the coach roll off with a sinking heart.

All he could do was to follow on foot.

The passengers were at a loss to understand the situation.

They had been halted but not robbed, and now were moving on once more, and at a brisker pace than before.

One of the brave men who was going to do so much in case of an attack, and had simply subsided, now felt his courage rise, and said, pompously:

"I'll see if that was the driver's joke to attempt to scare us."

He leaned far out of the window, and sternly said:

"Driver, what did that mean awhile—"

He dodged his head in again with a suddenness that gave him a blow which knocked his hat off.

But the coach did not stop for the hat.

"What is it?" gasped several in chorus.

"It's not the driver."

"What?"

This was in chorus.

"It's not our driver," whispered the man.

"Who is it?"

"A road-agent. We are being kidnapped, I think."

Every face in the coach was white with terror. They were expecting another massacre, this time down in the valley.

"I say, driver, where are you going?" called out one man, screwing up his courage to the sticking point.

Silk Ribbon Sam gave him a look, that was all.

He made no reply, and the man asked no more questions.

The whole party sat within, alarmed, in suspense and waiting to see what was going to happen.

"He drives well," said one.

"He drives recklessly, I think," another remarked.

"Far more rapidly than our other driver."

"Oh, yes, he sends 'em along at a peert gait, and knows how to drive 'em; but them road-agents kin do anything they wants to," an old-timer remarked.

At last from the box came the winding of the stage-horn, notifying those at Danger Station to be ready with the relay of horses.

The passengers certainly gave the strange driver credit for playing the horn well, but they looked upon it as a signal to his brother road-agents that he had brought them game to pick.

A few moments after the coach drew up at Danger Station and the passengers breathed freely, for they felt that after all they were safe, and that what had occurred back on the mountain had been but a joke after all.

CHAPTER XX.

RESUMING THE RIBBONS.

It was a most startling surprise to all at the station to see the coach dash up with the Mad Driver upon the box.

Silk-Ribbon Sam looked pale and haggard, and yet he seemed to be in full possession of his faculties.

He nodded to Nick Sawyer, unbuckled the reins, and threw them down, but did not leave the box, while the stable-boys were putting fresh horses to the coach.

The men looked at Nick Sawyer, and then up at Silk-Ribbon Sam.

The passengers looked out of the windows, and one asked:

"Is it all right, boss, for that hain't our driver up there?"

And he pointed up at the box.

"Where is Buck Riley, Sam?" asked Nick Sawyer, after Surgeon Powell had whispered something to him.

"I left him on Red Top."

"Did he kill him?" asked Sawyer, in a whisper, of one of the passengers.

"No; or I didn't see him do it, nor hear any shot."

"Who is he?" asked another of the passengers.

"Silk-Ribbon Sam, and he is just out from a severe illness, and, you notice, has been wounded."

"He's mad."

"We fear so."

"For God's sake, don't let him drive us."

"I'll not."

And Nick Sawyer said:

"Sam, I'm glad to see you out; but you are not well enough to drive yet, so let one of the boys relieve you until your return trip."

"No; I drive."

There was a look in the eyes that meant mischief if urged, and yet Nick Sawyer felt that he must do his duty and remove Silk-Ribbon Sam from the box, and he was about to attempt it when Surgeon Powell, who had been watching the driver closely, feeling that there would be serious trouble, said:

"Remember, Mr. Sawyer, I paid for a seat on the box, so will go on with Silk-Ribbon Sam, of whom I have so often heard."

And, with a significant look at Nick Sawyer, he sprang upon the box by the side of the driver.

"Glad to meet you, sir, as we are to go together."

"I am Surgeon Powell, of the army."

And he held forth his hand.

Sam took it in silence; the horses were ready now and he called out:

"Hand me ther ribbons, Tips!"

At a motion from Surgeon Powell Tips obeyed.

"All ready!" shouted Silk-Ribbon Sam, and the stage rolled away, the passengers greatly relieved by the whisper from Nick Sawyer that:

"It's all right; ther Surgeon Scout is with yer."

Away went the six horses at a rattling pace, Sam driving in his old way, and winning the admiration of Frank Powell, who for some time watched him in silence.

Then he said:

"I have heard of your wonderful driving, my friend, and feel that you have not been too highly praised."

"You must have driven from boyhood?"

"I have," was the laconic response.

"Where did you learn to drive so well?"

"At home."

"You have always lived West?"

"No."

"Ah! from the East; so am I, or rather, I was born in New York State; but have been a borderman since my boyhood."

"It's a wild life we lead here, Sam."

"Yes."

"Do you know Buffalo Bill?"

"Never met him."

"He is our greatest frontiersman, and you should know him."

"May, some day."

"By the way, it was you who had the coach the day the passengers were killed on Red Top?"

The face of Silk-Ribbon Sam paled and his eyes flashed.

He seemed deeply moved, and Surgeon Powell was watching him closely, though not appearing to do so.

"You were the man, for it was Silk-Ribbon Sam, I heard?"

"Yes, see there!"

He raised his sombrero and revealed the wound, which was barely healed.

"The road agents must have fired on you from ambush?"

Silk-Ribbon Sam made no reply, but his face worked convulsively.

Surgeon Powell saw that it was best not to speak more upon the subject and excite him, so he changed the subject and asked:

"Do you intend to continue to drive on the line?"

"Yes."

"But not over your old run?"

"Yes! yes!" he said, almost fiercely.

"Why did you go to Red Top to resume your driving?"

The Mad Driver passed his hand over his head as though not wholly understanding the question, and replied, slowly:

"I left my stage at Red Top—went back there to take it."

Surgeon Powell pressed him no more.

His knowledge of the human mind and body told him that Silk Ribbon Sam was then at least a wreck.

Physically he was all right, and mentally he would go through all duties devolving upon him as regarded the work he had been doing.

Attempt to remove him and he would become a raving maniac.

Let him alone and he would perhaps recover in time.

The wound, and what he had witnessed, that awful day on the mountain had proven to be a shock sufficient to unseat his mind.

When the next station was reached the people there were amazed indeed to see Sam on the box.

But, with the cunning of madness he would not dismount, fearing they would prevent his return, and leaping down, Surgeon Powell explained to the keeper the situation.

"I will get blamed for trusting the coach to a madman," he said.

"I will be responsible, and the passengers, you see, do not demur."

"All right, go ahead with him," was the answer, and Sam drove on once more, a pleased look upon his face.

The next station was the one which, in his flight from the mountain, he had gone to instead of where he lived.

Here was the agent in charge of that division of the road, and in driving by Danger Station, Silk-Ribbon Sam seemed to have realized the fact that he must go on to the settlement and have it understood whether he was to drive or not.

So on to the settlement he went, and a cry went up on the arrival of the coach, as he was recognized.

Here Sam left the box and entered the hotel, while Surgeon Powell quickly called Doctor Dunn aside, explained to him that he came from Buffalo Bill, to see after the Mad Driver, and ended by saying:

"I met Tips and turned back, and Sam drove up while there."

"He went back to Red Top, where he left the stage, to resume his duties, and my advice is to let him have the coach."

"He is harmless now, but it would make him a raving lunatic to deprive him of the coach."

"He attends strictly to his work, and so will continue to do, I pledge you."

"You know best, Surgeon Powell, and my own knowledge of medicine teaches me that you are right; so I'll let him take the coach back to Danger Station, and his own is about finished, for I have had it fully repaired, and he can take that again and resume his old runs from Danger Station westward and back."

"But, do you know that the wheelwright made a discovery that Sam's coach had a secret receptacle under the back seat, a false bottom, as it were, and put in since the coach was built?"

"This is strange."

"I cannot account for it, and I never heard of one of our coaches having it; and there has been gold-dust carried in this one, too, for here is some that I got out of there, as though a bag had broken open."

And Doctor Dunn showed the Surgeon Scout half a handful of gold-dust.

"This is something to be looked to, doctor, and I'll bear it in mind; but now go and tell the poor fellow you wish him to resume duty again, for it will cheer him up, and I'll ride back to Danger Station with him when he goes, and return on my horse, for I am to camp with you for awhile, according to the wishes of Buffalo Bill."

"Now isn't that good news to me, to have you with me; but I'll go and see Sam, and the coach rolls out again to-morrow, for this is his one day stop-over trip, the next giving him two days at Danger Station."

And the doctor left in search of Sam, whose face brightened up at the good news.

CHAPTER XXI.

BUCK RILEY SEEKS REVENGE.

WHEN the stage rolled away, leaving Buck Riley on Red Top, near the graves of the murdered passengers, he hastened to put space between himself and the weird spot as quickly as possible.

Buck was a brave man, that is, he was a bold driver, and could take his part in any fracas.

He had killed several men in personal affairs, and had the reputation of being a man whom it was dangerous to fool with, and I guess he was just that.

But Buck Riley was devoured with superstition.

He believed if a rabbit ran across his trail it was bad luck.

If he heard an owl hooting alongside at night, Buck was sure some one would die soon, and he was right, for, for every hooting owl a person dies, but they would have died all the same had the owl not hooted.

To shudder without seeming cause Buck said was a sign that some one was walking over the spot where you were to be buried.

Then he believed firmly in ghosts and spooks, and said that he had seen them.

With all these superstitions, Buck hastened to get away from Red Top.

After he did so, his superstitions gave place to anger.

He detested walking. It was too much like work, he was wont to say.

And yet he had fifteen long miles to walk to Danger Station.

He got madder as he progressed, and he trudged on, wondering how he had been so cleverly managed by the Mad Driver.

"I'll get even with him, now, bet you."

"The boys will have it in for me; but I'll make some of them regret laughing at Buck Riley."

And so he trudged on, having here and there

to ford a stream, climb a hill or go through a muddy bit of lowlands.

When at last Buck arrived in sight of the station he was at fever heat.

He was mad clean through, and he saw the group as he advanced, footsore and weary, taking far more interest in him than he cared to have them do.

"Hello, Buck, you is in?" cried one.

"What about Mad Sam gittin' ther coach from yer?"

"Did he make yer come down with a gun?"

Such were the questions that greeted him, and yet he answered none, only asked:

"Whar's Nick Sawyer?"

"I'm here, Buck," and Sawyer came out of the cabin.

"Nick, when I struck Red Top, Silk-Ribbon Sam were thar layin' fer me.

"He hed his rifle coverin' me, and told me to git down.

"I got down, and he got up and druv off, leavin' me on ther mountain, and I tells yer squar I are on ther war-path and mean ter hev it out with him."

"Don't be angry, Buck, for poor Sam is crazy, clean gone, I fear."

"Whar is he?"

"Gone on to the settlement with the coach."

"Why didn't Tim take her on?"

"Sam kept the box while here, and Surgeon Powell from the fort, who was here, thought it best to let him go on."

"Waal, when he comes back, he's got ter fight, fer I hain't no child ter be played with."

"Do nothing rash, Buck, or you may regret it; but tell me just how it all occurred."

Buck Riley told his story, and seeing the ill-humor he was in none of the boys cared to joke him about his walk from Red Top.

The next day he was in no better humor, and all feared trouble upon the return of the coach, if Silk-Ribbon Sam should come back with it.

As the time drew near for the coming of the coach, Tips started off down the trail to meet it, determined to put Sam on his guard.

But he came to a sudden halt, as he heard behind him a rapid step, and the words:

"Hold on, thar, Tips, for ef yer goes ter play any dirt on me, I'll put a bullet clean through yer."

"Come back to ther cabin, or I shoots."

"I'm not afraid of you, Buck Riley; but you has the drop on me and so I obeys," and Tips returned, while all others became more interested in what they were sure would soon happen.

Nick Sawyer could do no more than warn Buck, and said:

"I've advised you for your good, Buck, and if you pick a quarrel with a man whose reason has left him, you'll regret it."

"I'll take ther chances o' regrettin'," was the response, and just then the sound of the stage-horn came floating up from the valley.

"That's Sam, for no other can blow a horn like him," said Nick Sawyer, and he watched for the stage to come in sight.

Soon it appeared, and the Mad Driver was on the box, and by his side sat Surgeon Frank Powell.

There was a silence upon all at the station, and every eye was turned upon Buck Riley.

He sat on a bench, pale, silent, and with glaring eyes.

When he had been confronted on Red Top by the Mad Driver, he had not had the pluck to face him with a trial of strength.

But, jeered at by his companions, after his long walk, he had plotted mischief and meant to force the Mad Driver to meet him, determined that he would see to it that he, Buck Riley, had the advantage.

Up dashed the stage to the station, and it was crowded with passengers.

The doors were thrown open, the passengers sprung out to stretch their legs for the quarter of an hour halt, and the stable-boys went to unhitch the team and replace it by fresh animals.

Silk-Ribbon Sam did not look well.

His face was white and haggard, he had a strange light in his eyes, almost fierce it was, and his toilet was the same which he had had on at the massacre, and was blood-stained and torn.

It was in strange contrast to his usually almost foppish appearance which had gotten for him, along with that of Silk-Ribbon Sam, the name of the "Dandy Driver of the Rockies."

Frank Powell dismounted from the box leisurely.

He saw that something was the matter, but just what he could not divine.

Then Silk-Ribbon Sam dismounted and started toward his cabin without noticing any one.

As he did so, Buck Riley sprung from his bench, revolver in hand, and shouted out:

"Say, Ribbon Sam, that was a durned mean game yer played on me up on Red Top, and yer has got ter pay fer it, for I'm on ther war-path wuss nor a mad wolf."

Silk-Ribbon Sam had not halted, had not even looked toward the speaker, who, maddened at being ignored, threw his revolver to a level and

fired at him, although the back of the Mad Driver was toward him.

The bullet turned the hat of Silk-Ribbon Sam half-around on his head, but it seemed to turn the wearer entirely around, and so quick was his action that no one seemed to know just how it all occurred.

But the shot from Sam's revolver followed that of Buck Riley in a second, and ere the frightened passengers could rush to a place of safety, ere Powell and Nick Sawyer could interfere, Buck Riley was a dead man.

He fell in his tracks, his revolver in his hand exploding a second time as he went down, while Silk-Ribbon Sam walked quietly on toward his cabin.

A bullet-wound in the center of his forehead told Surgeon Powell that there was no need of his services.

"I feared trouble, but I did not expect it would end this way.

"Buck was awful quick, but Sam was lightning, and he's not to blame.

"Come, boys, take Buck's body out o' sight o' ther passengers, who ain't used to our little games o' life and death out here," said Nick Sawyer.

The passengers, all from the East, were huddled together in a group, their faces pale with alarm.

They had seen a border duel, and its consequences were before them.

They had been in raptures over the magnificent driving of Silk-Ribbon Sam up from the settlement, and they had just seen him show what he could do when brought to bay.

He disappeared in his cabin, while the body of Buck Riley was removed by the stable-boys, and Surgeon Powell and Nick Sawyer walked apart for a talk together.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SOLDIER'S DEMAND.

"THAT was quickly done, Sawyer," said Powell, as the two walked apart.

"Yes, it was a second's work, and Buck Riley got his deserts, for he meant to kill Sam against all I could say, and I shall so report it, for the rules of the company are very severe against its people fighting."

"I am witness to the fact that Sam acted only to save his life; but how cool he was about it."

"Yes, indeed, surgeon; but what do you think of him?"

"He's a most remarkable man."

"Clean gone in the head?"

"No, not as bad as that; but the wound and the shock have deranged him, and upon that subject he is silent."

"He has nothing to say about it and gets excited if I refer to it; so it is best to let him go on in his own way."

"But can he be trusted?"

"Wholly, my word on it for that."

"Then I'm to let him go on?"

"Certainly, for that has already been decided."

"He keeps his coach, and humor him in his queer ways, and warn the boys to say nothing to fret him, or to refer to the murder on Red Top."

"I shall see to it that they do not."

"But are you going on?"

"No, I shall return to the settlement on horse-back, and I have certain instructions for you, and will quarter a man with you for awhile, and he is to be taken as an assistant, for I must tell you, Sawyer, that we are going to rid this road of outlaws or Indians, who make it a terror now."

"I'm glad of that, surgeon."

"Buffalo Bill is the mover in it, and I must let you into the secret in part, and no one else at the station must suspect that the new man comes for aught else than to work."

"I see."

"Now, I will write a note, if you will give me pen, ink and paper."

These were provided, and when Surgeon Powell came out of the cabin, he found the time was up.

He went up and spoke to several of the passengers, told them that all would go well for the rest of the trip, and not to feel any anxiety.

Then Silk-Ribbon Sam appeared, coming from his cabin.

He looked his very best, though the wound on his forehead still left a red mark.

He had a handsome sombrero on his head, encircled by a cord of miniature silk reins, buckles and all, and he wore a velvet jacket, buckskin leggings, fringed, beaded, and stuck in handsome top-boots.

About his waist was a silk sash of crimson, and it but half-hid the revolvers in the belt underneath.

Upon his hands, as had always been his custom, were buckskin gauntlets.

Certainly Silk-Ribbon Sam was gotten up in his best rig, whatever his sorrows or sufferings might be.

"By Jupiter! get onto him!" said Nick Sawyer with delight, addressing Powell.

"He's a superb-looking fellow," Surgeon Powell responded, and then he asked, in a low tone:

"Sawyer, do you know if the coach carried any treasure the day of the murder?"

"Not unless it belonged to the pilgrims inside."

Silk-Ribbon Sam now approached the station boss, seemingly unconscious of attracting any attention, and asked:

"Any orders, Pard Sawyer?"

"None, Sam, for you know your work."

The driver bowed, and with a nod to Surgeon Powell, sprung upon the box.

The passengers hastened to take their seats, and the stage-coach rolled away, just five minutes late in leaving Danger Station.

There had been one or two passengers who had wished to ride on the box, but there was something in the look of the Mad Driver that deterred them from asking, and they contented themselves with remaining inside and enjoying the grand scenery from that point of observation.

The road over which the coach sped along was, as has been said, an alarming one, and at places the passengers fairly held their breath with awe and dread.

But the six horses moved along unswervingly, the wheels of the coach were guided unerringly by the master-hand on the ribbons.

The next station was reached, and in five minutes fresh horses were attached, the axles were greased, and the coach rolled on once more, Silk-Ribbon Sam speaking no word other than to ask the station boss if he had any orders.

The latter had been down to Danger Station the day before and understood the situation, so said nothing, and a note along the line sent by a courier from Nick Sawyer had instructed the agents how to act toward the Mad Driver.

Then came the climb of the mountain up to Red Top.

The face of the driver became stern and white as he neared the fatal spot.

But he held slowly on up the mountain, the admiration of the passengers increasing as they neared the top, and bursting forth in loud praise as the coach halted to breathe the horses.

It had halted in the very spot where the volley came that brought such death and destruction.

The passengers saw the five graves, and they knew that the man on the box had been the driver when the fearful tragedy had happened.

They knew that his mind had been upset, and they asked no word, for they had been warned not to do so by Surgeon Powell.

They were surprised then when Silk-Ribbon Sam leant over from the box and said, as he pointed with his gold-handled whip:

"This is Red Top, and the scene of the massacre of those in the stage-coach some time ago."

"Yonder are the graves of the victims."

Not a word came in reply.

The passengers dared not ask a question.

Then the stage moved on once more, and it had almost reached the graves, when it came to a halt.

Something barred the way.

Heads were thrust out of the window as a stern voice cried:

"Halt!"

In the trail stood a single person, a man in the uniform of a cavalry soldier.

He held a repeating-rifle in his hand and faced the Mad Driver.

"Who are you?"

The question was calmly asked by Silk-Ribbon Sam, whose hand toyed with the butt of one of the holster revolvers on each side of the box.

"I am here under orders from the commandant of the fort, to search your coach for a man who is wanted for certain reasons," said the soldier.

"Show your authority," said Sam coolly.

The soldier patted his rifle.

"That is not enough, and I will submit to no interference with my passengers, until I know that you are authorized to do so."

Silk-Ribbon Sam had suddenly dropped the border dialect manner of speaking, and his words were firmly uttered and to the point.

"I am perfectly willing, sir, to give you my authority, as you are in the discharge of your duty."

"You have a passenger on your coach who bears the name of Ned Marsden."

"He is wanted at the fort, and here is my authority to take him," and the soldier drew from his pocket a paper bearing the army stamp and seal, and handed it up to the driver.

Silk-Ribbon Sam read the official paper, and said:

"I yield, sir, and you can take your man."

The soldier stepped to the stage-coach, threw the door open and said:

"Ned Marsden, you are wanted."

"Come out quietly, and save trouble."

The one he addressed was a man of thirty, slender, almost boyish-looking, and wore the garb of the East.

His face paled as he heard his name called, and he thrust his hand into his bosom, when one of his fellow-passengers said quickly:

"Don't be a fool, for that soldier has his company to back him."

He said nothing, and when the soldier called to him to get out, he obeyed in silence.

"I am sorry to have alarmed you, gentlemen," said the soldier, politely, and then, addressing himself to Sam, he continued:

"I thank you, sir."

"You can drive on now."

Silk-Ribbon Sam chirped to his horses, and the coach rolled on, leaving the passenger standing in the trail and under guard of the soldier who had so cleverly made him a prisoner.

The soldier was Buffalo Bill.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A MYSTERIOUS RIDER.

SOME months prior to the opening scene of this story, a strange sight was visible on a plain in the Far West—a plain in the midst of a wild, lawless and Indian-ridden country.

The sight was a horsewoman, alone, well mounted, though her horse looked tired out, riding slowly along over the trackless plain.

She was dressed in what had once been a rich and stylish riding-habit, but it had seen hard usage evidently, for it was worn, torn and travel-stained.

The form it fitted was the perfection of grace and beauty, and her slouch hat, with its bedraggled plume of sable, did not conceal the exquisite beauty of her face.

She could scarcely have passed her twentieth year, and it seemed strange that a young girl, as she appeared, could be alone upon that wild, dangerous plain, that one could scarcely believe his senses.

Yet the fact was there, the woman a reality.

On her saddle-horn, in reach of her right hand, hung a small rifle, and a holster near it held a revolver.

There was a saddle-roll at her back, well filled it seemed, a gayly-colored Mexican *serape*, and a haversack that appeared to contain provisions.

But she was alone, not a soul in sight to rely upon, and her face showed anxiety at her situation.

Suddenly, over the rise of prairie a mile behind her, appeared several horsemen.

They came in single file, one, two, until a dozen appeared, and soon after half a dozen more in a group.

They came on at a rapid gallop, and as they drew nearer, it was evident that they were Indians, and, worse still, in pursuit of the horsewoman.

She had cast an eye behind her from time to time, as she rode along, and her face brightened each time, when she had seen no one in sight.

Now, as she looked again, her face paled, and from her lips came the low-uttered words:

"Ah! they still pursue me!"

She urged her horse forward, but the animal was hard to force into a gallop, and when she did urge him along it was with a gait that showed his powers of endurance were almost exhausted.

She laid her whip sharply upon him, and gazing behind her saw that her pursuers were going twice as fast as she was.

"It must soon end; but when all hope leaves me, I have this."

This meant her revolver, which she placed her hand on caressingly as though it were a friend dearly loved.

The woman continued to fly, not guiding her horse, but letting him go aimlessly ahead, and the Indians continued to gain, following hotly upon her trail.

The horse, left to himself, headed toward a distant *motte*, situated upon a little rise, somewhat difficult of approach.

The red-skins were yet a mile away when the tired horse fairly staggered into the timber.

A cry of joy came from the woman's lips, and reeling, she nearly fell from her saddle, as she beheld before her a horseman.

He was standing by the side of his horse, a splendid black animal, his repeating-rifle across his arm, and had evidently for some time seen the flight and pursuit.

Even in that moment of desperate danger, mingled with hope of aid, the woman noted the splendid appearance of the man.

"Oh, sir, you can save me," she cried, pleadingly, and yet with confidence in her tone that he could do so.

"Yes, but I wish you to obey me, and quickly."

"Come, there is no time to lose, so mount my horse and he will carry you to the fort."

"It is fifteen miles from here, and let him take his own gait and do not guide him, for he knows what to do."

"Arriving there, ask the commander, Captain Carrol, to send a scout and company of cavalry to the aid of Buffalo Bill, whom you left at the Red Oak Motte."

As the man spoke he had lifted the woman to the ground and quickly changed her saddle to his horse.

Then he raised her to her seat on his noble black, and said:

"You must start at once."

"And leave you to risk your life defending mine?"

"Do not be silly, for my life is a constant risk."

"To the fort, Black Boy!"

He slapped the horse as he addressed him, and the obedient animal sprung away at a gallop.

Had the woman wished to check him she would have been unable to do so, so she submitted with a good grace, glancing back as Black Boy carried her rapidly away from the timber.

Near where the scout stood there was a spring, and leading the tired horse to it he gave him a few swallows of water, bathed his red, panting nostrils, and then threw his own saddle upon him, hitching him near, while he stepped to the edge of the timber, rifle in hand.

"If I can stand them off half an hour the horse will be rested enough to keep me ahead of them," muttered Buffalo Bill.

The red-skins were not three hundred yards from the hill.

Their horses were tired, but came on at a swifter pace than had the animal ridden by the woman.

The approach to the hill was rocky and filled with wash-outs, so that they had to pick their way slowly; but they seemed to feel sure that the climb to the timber would utterly wear out the animal ridden by the pursued, and that they would find him broken down and their victim not far away.

When within a hundred and fifty yards of the timber, and suspecting no danger, from their manner of riding, they suddenly saw a puff of smoke, a rifle-shot followed, and the man in the lead fell dead, while his startled pony dashed directly on toward the *motte*.

In an instant there was a stampede, the Indians throwing themselves from their ponies, seeking shelter in the wash-outs and behind the rocks, and some of them retreating as rapidly as possible down the slope.

The scout could have fired rapidly, and done much damage, perhaps; but he did not do so.

Instead he contented himself with emptying another saddle, and catching the pony of the first Indian he had killed.

He knew that the check would last a few minutes at least.

He was right, for the red-skins were so completely demoralized by the surprise, that they hunted cover to think over what had happened.

Then they opened fire on the timber at random, several with rifles, and the rest with arrows.

The scout took matters coolly, for he led the pony he had captured to the spring and gave him some water.

Then he hitched him near the other horse, and taking up a position awaited developments.

"Twenty-seven of them," he said, as he coolly counted the horses in sight.

"Ah! they have gotten their wits to work, and intend to flank the hill I see."

"That will take half an hour."

"I'll show them who I am, and see if they will make a charge, so I can give them a lesson."

"If they do, I'll run them to cover and then hunt the back trail myself, and with some ten minutes' start at least."

As he spoke he stepped out into full view, gave a wild, ringing war-cry known along the whole border, and then sprang back to cover.

The cry was answered by the wildest yells, and a dozen Indians sprung from their cover, threw themselves upon their ponies and started up the hill, firing as they came.

"It was just as they expected."

"Now to make them think I am not alone, for they have not tumbled on the border yet to what a repeating-rifle is."

As he spoke he opened fire and a dozen shots rung out rapidly.

One, two Indians went down, a horse fell here, another was wounded there, and the red-skins broke in confusion, retreated and hunted cover once more, while Buffalo Bill hastily reloaded and ran back to the two horses.

He gave them another drink at the spring, threw himself upon the Indian pony, which was least tired, and rode out of the timber, leading the horse of the woman.

He had gotten a start of over half a mile when his flight was discovered, but with the rest his horses had had, he felt that he could at least hold his own for a few miles, and then help must come from the fort.

CHAPTER XXIV.

LOST.

THE sentinel on duty at the fort was considerably amazed to see a horse come flying over the plains, and upon his back a woman.

He called the corporal of the guard, and the "officer of the day" was sent for.

He turned his glass upon the horsewoman and then walked rapidly out to meet her.

"It's Cody's horse," he said, as the animal came on at a swiftness of pace.

She drew rein, or rather Black Boy slackened up as he came to the officer, feeling that he had done his work.

Captain Taylor politely raised his hat, and the woman said quickly:

"I come from Buffalo Bill, who gave me his horse in place of mine, which was used up."

"Buffalo Bill is at the Red Oak Motte, and wishes a scout and company of cavalry sent to him, for he has stayed to fight a large number of Indians who were pursuing me."

"For God's sake send him aid at once."

She reeled as she uttered the last words, and the handsome bachelor officer blushed as he caught her in his arms, for she had swooned away.

Help came at once, orders were rapidly given, and Leather Legs, a well-known scout, followed by forty cavalymen under a gallant lieutenant, started to the rescue of Buffalo Bill ten minutes after the arrival of the beautiful messenger.

The lovely woman, unconscious and white as though dead, was taken into the fort and resigned to the care of the wife of one of the officers.

It was a long time before she came to, and then she seemed to be quite ill.

Surgeon Powell gave her some soothing medicine, and said she must have perfect rest and quiet.

But through the night she frequently started up and asked:

"Has he come?"

"Has that noble man who stood between me and death, been rescued?"

At length Surgeon Powell came in and said that the company of cavalry had come upon Buffalo Bill soon after nightfall, and had found him standing at bay among a group of rocks, fighting the Indians who had wounded him and were drawing their lines closer and closer about him.

"The red-skins ran," he continued, "at the approach of the soldiers, and are being pursued by Cody and the company, so all is well."

The surgeon had told a story, but it was for the good of his patient; and he never flinched under the falsehood.

It had the desired effect, too, for the woman calmly sunk to sleep.

Then the surgeon went out to see if word had been heard from the scout.

No word had come; but at dawn a courier arrived and reported the case, by a strange coincidence, just as Frank Powell had reported it, with the additional information that the scout had been slightly wounded, the Indian pony he had captured killed, and several red-skins had bitten the dust under his unerring rifle.

About noon Buffalo Bill returned to the fort, accompanied by several wounded soldiers, the scout himself having been shot in the shoulder, though the wound was a slight one.

The soldiers had had an action with the red-skins, who had been reinforced by others, and beating them off were pursuing them toward their village.

"How is the lady?" asked Buffalo Bill, of the Surgeon Scout, the moment they had met.

"She is sleeping, and has been since the moment she heard you were safe, and will come around all right."

"But she was terribly nervous, and I told her a story to soothe her, and it turned out that I prophesied right."

"Who is she, Bill?"

"Don't know."

"What?"

"Was just going to ask you who she was."

"Where did you find her?"

"She found me."

"Come, Bill."

"Fact; I was scouting, and was asleep in the Red Oak Motte when Black Boy woke me up."

"I saw her coming, and some thirty Indians were a mile behind her."

"Her horse was broken down, so I put her on Black Boy and sent her to the fort, while I stopped to stand off the Indians."

"And that is all you know about her?"

"All."

"It is strange."

"Did she tell you nothing?"

"No."

"Nor Captain Carrol?"

"He has not seen her, for she fainted after delivering your message and was placed in the hands of Mrs. Bunce, who has given her a room in her quarters and cared for her in every way."

"What is her name?"

"She gave none; but the poor woman has hardly been herself, and will come around all right and tell us her story."

"I hope so; but this wound is not going to unfit me for work?"

"No, it is slight; but yet you had better spare yourself all in your power for a few days."

"I will; but I am anxious to know more about this beautiful woman, for her friends, I fear, have been captured by the Indians or massacred."

"I hope not; but I will ask her the moment she is able to bear questioning."

Soon after, Surgeon Powell went to Captain Bunce's quarters to see his patient.

He, too, was anxious to know about this strange rider alone over the plains.

Mrs. Bunce told him that his patient was awake and felt better, but very tired.

"Has he come?" she asked Surgeon Powell, as he entered the room.

"You mean Cody?"

"I mean Buffalo Bill, as he called himself."

"Yes, he is here."

"Thank God, his life is not for me to repent of," she said earnestly.

Surgeon Powell took a seat by the bed and laid his hand upon her pulse.

He felt that he had never seen a more beautiful woman.

"You are improving rapidly, and will soon be yourself again, with a few days' rest."

"I hope so, for I must go on my way."

"Whither?"

"To join my husband, who is—in—California."

"Ah!"

Surgeon Powell had not thought her married. "May I ask how it was that Buffalo Bill found you alone upon the plains?"

"I came West as far as I could by rail, then bought a horse and joined a train, and the Indians attacked us some fifty miles, I should think, from where I met Buffalo Bill."

"I, with several others, escaped on horseback; we became separated in the darkness, and when daylight came I found I was being pursued."

"Had it not been for Buffalo Bill I would have died, for I meant to kill myself rather than be taken."

"Thank you; and now excuse me while I report what you say to the commanding officer, who will send a force out to see if it is too late to aid the train you were with."

"It is too late," she said in a low tone.

But Surgeon Powell made his report, and Captain Taylor, with Buffalo Bill, who would go, and six scouts, and sixty cavalymen, all well mounted, started off to lend succor if not too late to the train which the lovely woman had spoken of.

They were gone a week, and returning reported having found the train.

It had been attacked, and several of the number, among them Mrs. Braxton, a young and beautiful woman, had mounted their horses and fled.

What had become of her none in the train had known, but those who disappeared with her had returned to the camp to report that she had become separated from them in the darkness.

These had the next day disappeared to search for her and had not been seen.

The train boss also reported that the red-skins had been beaten off, so if they had remained with the train no harm would have befallen them.

The fair wife expressed a desire to remain at the fort until she could hear from her husband, and a letter was written and mailed to him.

The next day a courier arrived at the fort with dispatches, and seeing Mrs. Braxton he doffed his hat and walked forward and spoke to her.

She explained to Mrs. Bunce that she had known him in the East.

The courier departed the same day, and the next Mrs. Braxton, who was wont to ride about near the fort on pleasant afternoons, mounted her horse and went out for a gallop all alone, declining the offers of several young officers as an escort.

Night came and she did not return.

A storm came up during the night, with pouring rain, and in the morning even the skill of Buffalo Bill could not follow her trail.

As days passed on, and all search proved unavailing, the beautiful woman was given up as lost, and a gloom fell upon all at the fort, for she had, without doubt, been captured by some prowling band of red-skins and either put to death or carried to a captivity far more terrible.

CHAPTER XXV.

TRUE AS STEEL.

WHEN Silk-Ribbon Sam drove away from the graves on Red Top, he glanced over his shoulder and saw the soldier still standing in the trail and before him the passenger whom he had taken from the stage coach.

As the coach disappeared the passenger asked hoarsely:

"Who are you, and why have you committed this outrage?"

"You ask who I am."

"Do you not know?"

"I do not know, though your face does have a familiar look."

"Look well at me."

"I do."

"Have we never met before?"

"I do not recall where."

"Have you ever been to the fort commanded by Captain Carroll?"

"No," and the man started.

"I think you have forgotten—"

"I am on my trip West for the first time."

"Where do you hail from, Mr. Marsden?"

"I am from the East."

"What is your name?"

"Dan Dudley."

"Why did you not correct me just now when I called you Mr. Marsden, and when I asked if one bearing such name was not in the stage?"

The man bit his lips but remained silent.

"Your name on the stage books is Ned Marsden."

"How do you know?"

"No matter; but tell me if you recall me when I say we met last at the fort?"

"What fort?"

"I told you, the outpost commanded by Captain Louis Carroll?"

"I do not remember you."

"I am called Buffalo Bill."

The man started visibly, and then his face flushed under the penetrating gaze of the scout.

"The last time we met, Mr. Ned Marsden, was on the trail."

"You were dressed in the uniform of a cavalymen, well-mounted, and were on your way to the fort."

"We rode on together, you bearing dispatches."

"You remained a day at the fort, said that you came from Colonel Miles's post, and while there you spoke to a lady who said that she had met you some years before in the East."

"That night you departed, carrying dispatches from Captain Carroll to Colonel Miles."

"Those dispatches never reached the colonel, sir, so what became of them?"

"You are mistaken in the man, and you are not Buffalo Bill, for he was a scout, with long hair, mustache and imperial."

"Ah! your tongue gives you away, Mr. Marsden, for how do you know that Buffalo Bill is such a person as you describe?"

"I have seen his picture."

"You are mistaken, for living on the plains all my life, I have not had my picture taken."

"You are the man I seek, and I was sure of it, when word came to me three hours ago that one Ned Marsden had taken passage at a station for the West, and looked like the courier who had brought what purported to be dispatches to Captain Carroll."

"Now, those dispatches were bogus, and stopped Captain Carroll from sending out a squadron, as he had intended to do, and gave the Red Riders, or Red-men, as they are called, a chance to make a ten-strike for booty upon a Government paymaster."

"The dispatches given you were not delivered, and you are the man whom I seek."

"I am not, and you cannot prove it."

"I wish no better proof than my own eyes."

"But now tell me what you know about the lady, Mrs. Braxton, whom you met at the fort that day."

"Next to nothing."

"Hail you are a bad man to be trusted on an important mission, my dear Marsden, for you constantly make a present of yourself to some one, in other words, give yourself away."

"You do know her then, for your words condemn you!"

"Granted that I do, for I did make a slip."

"What then?"

"Who is she?"

"Mrs. Braxton."

"Where from?"

"The East."

"The East is large, Mr. Marsden."

"Where do you mean?"

"In New York."

"Where is her husband?"

"In California."

"What doing?"

"In business."

"What business?"

"Banking business."

"And what were you when you met her?"

"A clerk."

"Why did you come West?"

"That is my own affair."

"You refuse to answer?"

"I do."

"Have you ever heard of the Red-men?"

"No."

"Have you ever heard of the Red Riders?"

"I have heard of a band of outlaws of that name who infest the Overland Trails."

"Do you know what I believe?"

"No, and do not care."

"I believe you are the spy of the Red-men."

The man became livid and dug his nails nervously into the palms of his hands.

"I am sure that you are a Red-man, Red Rider, or whatever other name you care to be known by; but you belong to that band of cut-throats, and I have captured you to offer you terms."

"I defy you to prove your charge against me, which is infamous."

Buffalo Bill smiled, and, suddenly dropping his revolver full upon the heart of the man, he cried, sternly:

"Hands up, sir!"

The hands were raised sullenly.

Then the scout said, while he held his revolver in one hand:

"This weapon is cocked and my finger upon the trigger, so beware not to force me to kill you."

"If you resist I will do so."

"See here!"

He tore open the coat of the man as he spoke and revealed in the scarf about his neck a strange pin.

It was a red band, of coral, holding four cards, a quartette of aces—a unique pin indeed.

"I have the match for that pin, and with it a red blouse."

"You are certainly a member of the outlaw band of Red-men, and I have captured you to offer you terms."

"If you agree to those terms, then your life shall be spared."

"If you refuse, then you shall be hanged, so you can take your choice as to whether it shall be life or death with you."

The man stood like a statue.

His face worked convulsively, and he was unable to hide his emotion, though the piercing eyes of Buffalo Bill were upon him, reading his every expression.

The scout had disarmed him, and the prisoner was utterly at his mercy.

"Do you intend to accept my terms?"

"What are they?"

"Life in the one case, death in the other."

"What am I to do?"

"You are to betray your comrades."

"I will not do it."

"You are to lead me, secretly, and alone, to the retreat of the Red-men, show me how to reach their camp."

"You are to tell me just how many there are, and all about them."

"Then I shall tie and gag you, and, finding out for myself whether you have told the truth, will return to you."

"If you have deceived me, I take you to the fort to be hanged."

"If you have told me the truth, I will take you with me to the settlement and leave you there under guard for two days, while I go with a force to capture the Red-men."

"Then you are to be released to go where you will, except to remain here on the border, for, if you do that, I shall kill you at sight wherever I find you."

"Now, sir, you know the terms I offer, and it remains for you to say whether you accept or refuse them."

"I refuse," and the man's face lost its dread as though by magic.

"You refuse?"

"I do."

"Remember your fate."

"I can die but once."

"And you die by the gallows!"

"So be it, I care not what way I die, if die I must."

"You had better consider."

"I will not betray my chief and comrades."

"You mean this?"

"I do."

"Irrevocably?"

"Irrevocably."

"Then I pity you, for die you must."

"Come with me!"

The man silently obeyed, the scout walking back into the heavy timber, firmly grasping the arm of his prisoner.

CHAPTER XXVI.

SINGLE-HANDED.

It was the day after the taking of the prisoner from the coach that Silk-Ribbon Sam came back on his return trip to Danger Station.

He had made the run in safety, speaking only when necessary for him to do so, and yet carrying out every duty that devolved upon him.

Never had he driven better, and he was on time on arrivals and departures to the minute.

As he reached Red Top on his return, he saw the soldier, as he supposed Buffalo Bill to be, standing by the group of graves awaiting him.

Near him was the prisoner whom he had taken from the coach the day before.

Silk-Ribbon Sam drew up when the scout motioned him to do so.

He had read a paper the scout carried, and he knew from whence it came.

"Driver, you are to take this prisoner to the settlement station, and deliver him into the hands of Surgeon Powell of the army, who is now there."

"Should the surgeon be away, deliver him to Doctor Dunn, the agent, with instructions to hold him until Powell comes."

"Here is a letter to Surgeon Powell, and you will please give the prisoner a seat on the box with you."

"All right, sir," replied Silk-Ribbon Sam, and he made room for the prisoner, whom Buffalo Bill ordered to mount the box, and then bound there securely, hands and feet.

There were four passengers in the coach, all of them bordermen from their looks, and they gazed in silence upon what was going on.

Ned Marsden, the prisoner, uttered no word, and he quietly obeyed every order given him by the scout.

Taking the letter from Buffalo Bill, Silk-Ribbon Sam thrust it into his pocket and drove off without another word.

The stage rolled on its way, and engrossed with the steep, dangerous descent of the mountain, Silk-Ribbon Sam failed to notice that every now and then a head would peer out of one window or the other of the coach, and make

a sign to the prisoner, who almost constantly glanced behind him.

Suddenly a head appeared from each window, then the shoulders, next the body, and two men drew themselves up on top of the coach.

Creeping toward the box, one of them raised his revolver and brought it down heavily upon the head of the driver.

But a lurch of the coach and sudden movement of Silk-Ribbon Sam saved him from instant death.

As it was, the blow half-stunned him, and rising, a lurch of the coach threw him from the box.

He fell into a thicket, while with a yell of triumph the man who had sought to kill him sprang to the seat he had vacated and grasped the reins.

The horses were moved forward at a quicker pace, while the other man on top of the coach cried out:

"We've saved yer, pard."

He addressed the prisoner, and his companion who held the reins added:

"Sure as shootin' we has, and got ther coach, too."

"We'll set yer free when we reaches ther valley, for that Mad Driver may not be much hurt and foller."

The stage rolled on in its winding trail until, rounding the head of a canyon, the trail formed a perfect horse-shoe, going back within a hundred yards of the spot where Silk-Ribbon Sam had been hurled from the box.

There the trail led close alongside of a ledge of rocks rising some six feet above the top of the coach.

Suddenly over the ledge was thrust a revolver, a sharp report followed, and another in quick succession, and the two wheel-horses went down with a bullet in their brains.

Then came a third shot, and the driver fell to the ground a dead man, and upon the top of the coach from the ledge leaped Silk-Ribbon Sam, while at the same instant he hurled the second man to the ground, where he lay in a heap, like one badly hurt.

"Hand out your weapons, or I will kill you!"

The words were addressed to the two men in the coach.

"We hain't no fools, pard, for we kin play a game o' ball as well as you!" said one.

The response of the driver from where he crouched on the box by the side of the prisoner was to send a bullet into the coach.

A yell of pain followed, and two shots came back from within, but without damage, though the prisoner called out:

"Say, pards, you'll kill me."

Another shot from the driver into the coach brought forth:

"Hold on, for we caves!"

"Hand out your weapons one by one."

A revolver was thrust from the window.

Instantly the driver severed the bonds on one hand of the prisoner and said, hoarsely:

"Take that weapon!"

The man obeyed, unsuspecting the cunning of the Mad Driver.

As his hand was reached down a shot came from within, and it was shattered with a bullet, while with a yell of triumph a head was thrust out of the coach, and a hand with a revolver.

A shot and the man fell across the window, the weapon dropping from his hand.

"Do you intend to make me kill you, too?" came the stern demand of the scout.

"No, I surrenders!"

"Then hand out your weapons, one in each hand, and held by the barrels."

The weapons came out as directed, and were taken by the Mad Driver.

"There are more!"

"Only one, pard," and out came the weapon.

"Now, get out and lie flat on your face!"

The man obeyed, and taking a rope from the box caddy, Silk-Ribbon Sam sprang down and quickly bound the prisoner.

Then he went to the one he had hurled from the box and found that he had a broken shoulder.

He raised him in his arms as though he was a child, and placed him in the coach, disarming him of his belt of weapons, which he seemed in no humor to use.

The dead body of the man he had shot from the box was also put in the coach, the prisoner followed, and was securely bound there, and then the driver unhitched his four leaders, dragged the dead animals out of the way, made two of the others wheelers, and getting upon his box drove on as quietly as though nothing had occurred.

"You are a remarkable man, indeed, and if you are mad, there is method in your madness," said Ned Marsden, lost in admiration of the man who had so cleverly taken his coach against such odds as he had had to contend with.

The Mad Driver made no reply, but drove on in silence, managing his two new wheelers, who, unused to the pile, were fretting and plunging, with the skill of a master of the reins as he was.

As they reached the valley the driver drew rein, and turning to his prisoner on the box with him, said as though continuing the conversation:

"And you are a brave man, and I will now dress the wound your friend gave you, for here is a stream of water."

CHAPTER XXVII.

MYSTERY AT DANGER STATION.

THE stage-horn blew just as merrily as the coach approached Danger Station as though within it there were not two dead forms, a man with a broken shoulder and two prisoners.

The Mad Driver drew up at the station, tossed the reins on the backs of his horses, and springing down to the ground said, quietly:

"Mr. Sawyer, that man on the box went through as a passenger with me, you remember, but a soldier, under orders from General Miles, arrested him and sent him back to-day as a prisoner."

"The men inside proved to be his friends and attempted his rescue, so that accounts for what you will find in the coach in the way of dead and disabled— Oh! Surgeon Powell, here is a letter for you from the soldier I met on Red Top, and he told me to deliver the prisoner to you also."

And Silk-Ribbon Sam turned to Surgeon Powell who just then came out of the cabin, having arrived at Danger Station but a few moments before.

As the Mad Driver was to go no further, that being the end of his line, he turned the coach over to the driver who was to take it on and walked off toward his cabin.

Nick Sawyer was amazed.

There were two dead men in the coach, one with a broken shoulder, a prisoner, and on the box another bound man, one of whose hands was bound up from a wound received.

The face of the Mad Driver had been badly scratched from his fall in the bushes, and there was blood on his shoulder from the scalp-wound on his head.

"Pard Doctor, there has been the devil to pay on this run," said Nick Sawyer.

"Yes, and Driver Sam's report was too modest to learn much about it," replied Powell, who had just finished reading the letter Sam had given him from Buffalo Bill.

"This man will doubtless let us know all about it, while I dress his wound."

"I am glad I happened to ride up here to-day," continued Surgeon Powell, as he stepped toward the prisoner Marsden.

"There's no reason why I shouldn't tell."

"The soldier who arrested me took me for a member of the Red-men band and sent me back to you."

"These men thought I was being imposed on, I suppose, and attempted my rescue, with the result you see, and the moral is to let that Mad Driver alone," and Ned Marsden spoke in a reckless sort of way, hiding the pain from his wound as best he could.

"I recognize you, sir, as the bogus courier who gave us a call at the fort, as this letter says you are; but I suppose it is to be proven whether you are a Red Rider or not."

"Let me look to your wound, please."

"The driver dressed it like one who knew what he was about, but of course had no surgical instruments."

"I only hope I will not lose my hand," and by degrees the prisoner told all that had happened, while Surgeon Powell dressed the wound, remarking:

"The bullet, fortunately for you, passed between the first and second bones, making an ugly wound, but not a serious one."

"Now to yonder poor fellow who seems to be suffering," and he pointed to the man with the broken shoulder.

This was soon set, and the stage, which had been detained by Nick Sawyer, went on to the settlement with the two wounded men and the prisoner, Surgeon Powell returning with it to look after the sufferers.

The two dead men were buried at Danger Station, and Silk-Ribbon Sam walked up to the graves and looked on with the coolest manner possible and in perfect silence.

The men at the station had heard all that had occurred, and they looked upon him as more of a hero than ever.

Having witnessed the burial of the two men, whom he had slain, the Mad Driver went back to his cabin, got his saddle and bridle and going to the corral pasture mounted his horse and rode away.

He took the trail he had always done, and hardly had he disappeared when Nick Sawyer called to one of his men.

"Crosby, you have been a scout and know how to trail."

"Follow Sam and see just where he goes and what he does, for I want to know certain things that now seem mysterious."

Crosby at once swung his rifle over his shoulder, mounted a wiry little mustang, and started upon the trail of the Mad Driver.

It was then about noon and at dark Silk-Ribbon Sam returned.

He went to his cabin until the horn blew for supper, and joined the others at the station in the large cabin used as a kitchen.

He ate with seeming relish, but in perfect si-

lence, speaking to no one, and then returned to his own quarters.

The light soon after was extinguished and he had retired.

But Crosby had not returned.

Nick Sawyer sat up until late awaiting him and then retired.

"Crosby has struck some lead, that is certain," he said, feeling no anxiety about the non-appearance of the man.

The morning came and still Crosby had not returned.

Nick Sawyer grew anxious.

Sam came to the cabin for breakfast, and seemed to enjoy the meal.

As he did not have to go out with the coach until the next day, he mounded his horse as before and rode away.

"Tips!"

"Yas, boss."

"I want you to go after Silk-Ribbon Sam and see where he goes and what he does," said Nick Sawyer.

"Whar's Crosby, for he went yesterday?"

"I do not know."

"I hates spyin' on a good fellow like Ribbon Sam, boss."

"It is for his good, Tips, for I wish to find out just what he is about."

"You can outwalk any horse, and tire one down, so go on foot, and see just what you can discover."

"I'll do, sir, as yer says, but I'll ride a horse; but I'm thinkin' poor Ribbon Sam hain't com' no harm."

"Nor do I think so, Tips; but I wish to know."

"I'm off," and Tips mounted his horse and struck the trail of the Mad Driver.

The day passed, and still Crosby did not return.

Nick Sawyer grew very anxious, and talked to several of the men at the station about the strange circumstance.

"Maybe he seen Crosby followin' him, and jist plugged him," suggested one.

The horn blew for supper, and just then Silk-Ribbon Sam appeared.

He put up his horse and came over to the kitchen.

Silent, gazing upon vacancy, as it were, he sat until his supper was given to him by the station cook, and then he ate it without a word, arose and went to his cabin.

In a short while the light was put out, showing that he had gone to bed.

Nick Sawyer was excited, an unusual thing for him to be.

Tips had not returned, nor had Crosby.

What did it mean?

No one could answer the question, and Nick Sawyer, the cook and four remaining stablemen sat in the kitchen discussing the situation.

"He hev kilt 'em both, maybe," said one.

This no one wished to believe.

But the morning came and neither Crosby or Tips had returned.

Silk-Ribbon Sam appeared at breakfast all right, rigged out for his drive, for by ten o'clock the coach would roll in.

"Sam, have you seen anything of Crosby?" asked Nick Sawyer, as they sat at breakfast, and every eye was upon the Mad Driver.

Not a muscle of his face changed as he looked about him and said:

"Is he not here?"

"No."

"Where is he?"

"He went off on a little hunt day before yesterday and has not returned."

"Perhaps he has met a grizzly, and is killed or wounded."

"If I did not have to go out this morning, I would help you look for him."

And he arose and left the cabin.

The men looked at each other in silence.

Then Nick Sawyer arose and followed the driver.

"Sam, Tips is also missing, and maybe you have seen him?"

"I saw him yesterday morning, boss, for he was at breakfast with us."

"And not since?"

"No, not since yesterday morning," and he rubbed his hand upon his head as though it was painful for him to think.

Nick Sawyer was in despair; but he determined, as soon as Silk-Ribbon Sam departed on the coach, to take three men with him and go in search of the two missing men.

The coach arrived with only one passenger, a Chinnee, and mounting, in place of the driver who brought it in, Silk-Ribbon Sam sent the horses away on the trail at a rattling pace.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MYSTERIES UNSOLVED.

NICK SAWYER and his two companions, well-mounted and armed, set forth to try and find Crosby and Tips, as soon as the stage rolled out of sight.

Nick had been a scout and Indian-fighter in early life, and was a good trailer.

He took a good look at the tracks of the horses, and started on the trail.

He followed the trail of Silk-Ribbon Sam's

course, and with it went that of the animal ridden by Crosby.

He followed the tracks to a small stream, and there lost them.

In spite of his skill, and the keen eyes of his two companions, no trace of a trail could be found further than that stream.

Up and down they went, examining the banks most thoroughly, but the trail ended at the brook, as far as they could see, though it might have gone on over the rocky ground ahead.

Still to the brook it was plainly marked, but from there it was an utter blank.

It was useless to waste time with further search, so Nick Sawyer and his men started upon their return to the station.

They had hoped to find one or both of the lost men there upon their return; but in this they were disappointed.

So Nick Sawyer sat down to write his report of the strange affair to Colonel Cassidy and know what to do about it.

He did not accuse the Mad Driver, but only stated it as a strange circumstance that both men who had followed him had not returned.

Nor had a trace of them been found beyond the brook, and neither of their horses had yet returned to town.

"If Ribbon Sam has gotten away with them, which I cannot believe, then he is the most innocent-looking and cool murderer I ever beheld," he said, in his letter to Colonel Cassidy.

The next day came and neither of the missing ones appeared.

But upon time to the minute came the coach, with Silk-Ribbon Sam on the box.

The day before he had started out with but one passenger, a Chinese.

As he ascended the steep trail leading to Red Top, a face appeared at the coach-window.

It was a cunning, leering face, that of the Chinese passenger.

He wore a self-satisfied smile upon his countenance and glanced up at the back of the driver.

He seemed interested in the broad shoulders and long hair of Silk-Ribbon Sam, for he leant further out of the window to see him.

Then he turned his back to the stage-window and leaned out.

Next he raised his hands, grasped the iron guard-rail around the top of the coach, and still with his eyes upon the driver, began to draw himself upward.

He did so until he managed to slip his feet out of the window, and lowering himself his full length, he let them rest upon the step of the coach.

The driver suspected nothing, saw nothing, and the Chinese slipped from the step to the ground and sprang into a thicket, while the stage rolled on to the top of the mountain.

There, at the graves, the Mad Driver halted, as was his custom, to breathe his horses.

No one was visible, and he spoke no word.

He simply passed his hand across his forehead, a way he had of late, and then drove on.

When he had reached the valley on the other side of Red Top he halted at a cool spring that bubbled up out of a bed of rocks.

It was where he always halted to give the passengers a drink and to water his horses.

He dismounted with a tin dipper in his hand and said:

"Have some water, Pard Chinese?"

No reply.

He supposed the Chinese was asleep, and as he had ample time to indulge in that pastime he decided to awaken him.

So he threw open the door and said:

"Ice-cold water, pard."

He started back.

The coach was empty!

He passed his hand over his head in a dazed kind of way and then closed the door.

He looked all about him, but saw no one.

Then he unchecked his horses and let them drink from the spring rivulet that crossed the trail.

Then he mounted his box and drove on once more.

It was very evident that he was bothered, for he looked it.

But he drove on to the end of his run and handed in his stage-list.

"Where is the Chinese, Sam?" asked the station-agent, reading the list.

"I don't know."

"Don't know?"

"No; he was in at Danger Station, but gone at the Ice Spring."

"This is strange."

"Yes."

And he rubbed his forehead in that same old way, as though trying to remember.

"And the paymaster's box, where is that?"

"I have it."

And the iron box in question was fished out of the boot.

"That's all right, so durn the Chinese," said the agent, and the Mad Driver went in to his supper, for at midnight he was to start back on the run, and it was then ten o'clock.

The stage came in on time from the west, and Silk-Ribbon Sam mounted the box of his coach to start back.

The night was cloudy and a storm threatened, but he cared not, and alone, for there was not a single passenger, he started on the return to Danger Station.

The storm broke in fury, the thunder roared through the mountains like a thousand heavy guns, and the vivid flashes of lightning were blinding.

But the splendid driver held his horses well in hand, reached the stations on time, and soon after sunrise passed over Red Top and began the descent toward Danger Station.

In one of the most dangerous parts of the descent a form appeared as the coach passed.

It paced alongside for a few steps, slipped upon the step of the coach, raised to a standing position and drew up into a ball which suddenly disappeared within.

"No passengers, sir," said Silk-Ribbon Sam, as he sprang from his box at Danger Station.

But, as he uttered the words he beheld the leering face of the heathen Chinese peering at him from the coach window.

In an instant he had seized him and dragged him out.

"When did you get into my coach?"

"Round Topee."

"When did you leave it yesterday?"

"Round Topee."

"How did you do it?"

"Slippee outee, slippee innee."

"What did you do it for?"

"Funnies."

The Mad Driver threw the Chinese from him and walked away to his cabin, while Nick Sawyer tried to find out why the almond-eyed passenger had done as he did.

But the Chinese would not tell, and so went on in the coach with Bu'sted Bob upon the box, a driver who was never known to have a dollar, and hence had won the name.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE HEATHEN CHINESE.

WHEN the heathen Chinese had dropped from the stage-coach on its westward run, he waited in the thicket until the sound of wheels died away, and then he began to follow on the trail.

He cautiously approached Red Top, and peering over saw that the coach had gone on.

Then he walked forward boldly to the graves, and suddenly was confronted by a tall form.

"Ho, Buckskin, you are here?"

It was Buffalo Bill, in his uniform as a soldier.

"Yes, Buffalo Billee, me come; have lettee," said the Chinese, and he handed the scout a letter.

Buffalo Bill read it slowly, and then said:

"Have you made any discovery at the station where you are?"

"Not muchee."

"What have you found out?"

"Thinkee Red-men have spy on trailee."

"Do you suspect who the spy is?"

"Me keep eye opee and find outee."

"That is right; but how far from your station is Kansas?"

"Niggee long way offee."

"Well, this letter from Surgeon Powell says that all of our men are placed, and I want you to find out all you can, according to my instructions, bringing me word of every passenger that goes East or comes West."

"Allee lightee."

"If you discover anything you think I should know, go at once to the settlement where Surgeon Powell is stationed, and report to him."

"But why did you walk?"

"No walkee."

"How did you come?"

"Ridee."

"On what?"

"Coachee."

"I saw it halt here, from my cover yonder, but no one got out."

"Me skippee out."

"Silk-Ribbon Sam did not see you?"

"No see Chinese."

"How will you get back?"

"Go in coachee to-morrow—slippee innee."

"And if Sam catches you, he slippee a bullet into your hide."

"No catchee."

"You are a sly devil, Buckskin; but come over to my camp with me, for you will have to wait until to-morrow, and then take the coach openly, for I am afraid you will be shot playing your tricks."

"No shootee," was the confident reply of the Chinese, who followed Buffalo Bill back along the ridge until they came to a break in the mountain.

Here there was a spring, and in the neighborhood an abundance of grass.

Black Bay was lariatied near, and greeted his master with a look of welcome.

The scout had built for himself a wickiup of boughs, and had made a very comfortable camp of it.

Buckskin passed the night in camp, and then, with a letter from Buffalo Bill to Surgeon Powell, he started on his return.

The scout went to his hiding place, from

whence he could see the coach go by, and supposed that Buckskin would take it there, openly.

But the sly heathen liked his own way best, and, as has been seen, got back into the coach as cunningly as he had left it.

When the coach, with Bu'sted Bob handling the ribbons, reached the settlement, Buckskin delivered his letter to Surgeon Powell, and resumed his journey on to the station where he had been placed, for Buffalo Bill's detectives had been cleverly distributed along the lines of the Overland to glean all the information they could that would be of use in trailing the mystery of the Red Top massacre to the end.

Bu'sted Bob had brought a letter also to the surgeon.

It was from Nick Sawyer, and asked the Surgeon Scout to please come up at once to Danger Station.

It was a request which Surgeon Powell could not disregard, and so he said to the agent:

"Doctor Dunn, I will have to leave these wounded men in your care, and be sure that none of them escapes, or they may upset all of our plans."

"I'll see to 'em, Surgeon Powell, never fear; and if they attempt to escape I'll fill 'em so full of lead they won't be able to go far," was the response of Pills.

Mounting his horse, Surgeon Powell at once started for Danger Station, and upon his arrival there was told of the mysterious disappearance of Crosby and Tips.

"I cannot believe that he has killed them, Nick," said Frank Powell.

"Then whar are they, Doc?"

"That I do not know."

"Nor I."

"It looks curious."

"It is curious, and it looks worse."

"Where is Sam now?"

"In bed in his cabin."

"What did he do after bringing his stage in this morning?"

"Mounted his horse and rode away."

"He does not go out on the stage to-morrow?"

"No."

"When does he?"

"Bu'sted Bob brings the coach in to-morrow, and Sam takes it on then."

"Then he will be here to-morrow?"

"He is sure to go off on that lonely ride he takes each time he is here at the station."

"Well, I'll follow him to-morrow."

"Don't do it, Pard Powell."

"Certainly I will; but don't let him know I am here."

"Have some breakfast for me in the morning, and my horse ready, and I'll trail him as soon as he leaves the station."

"I hate to see you go."

"Why?"

"There's Crosby and Tips."

"Well, I'll go prepared for anything that may turn up, which they evidently didn't do."

"I'm sorry I sent for you, Doc."

"You need not be."

"I'd never forgive myself if you went away and didn't return, as they did."

"Never fear, for I'm not easily entrapped, Nick, nor caught napping," was the smiling reply.

And the Surgeon Scout retired to rest in the room given him by Nick Sawyer.

In the morning, after he had had his breakfast, Silk-Ribbon Sam mounted his horse and rode away, as it had been his wont to do since he had lived at Danger Station as stage-driver.

He had been gone but a short while when Surgeon Powell appeared; his horse was ready for him, and he rode away on the trail of the Mad Driver, while Nick Sawyer, with a face full of foreboding, stood gazing after him.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE SURGEON SCOUT ON THE TRAIL.

SILK-RIBBON SAM had been gone from the station but a few minutes, when Surgeon Powell set off on his track.

An experienced scout and trailer, Frank Powell had no difficulty in following the driver's track, and did so for several miles.

At length he came to a valley that he had to cross.

There was a stream in the center of it, and upon one bank a thicket growing about a few large boulders.

This was the only break in the valley, or plain.

When Surgeon Powell reached the point that overlooked the valley, he beheld, on the further side, the figure of the horseman he followed just disappearing over the hill on the other side.

He waited a moment and then followed.

He had crossed the stream, halting a moment for his horse to drink, when he suddenly saw the head and shoulders of a man appear over the hill where Silk-Ribbon Sam had gone.

Instantly he spurred to the shelter of the thicket, and there concealed himself behind a huge rock.

A glance had shown him that the horseman was Ribbon Sam returning.

He did not wish the driver to see him, and to

suspect that he was following him, for he, of all, knew best that the reason of Silk-Ribbon Sam was unseated.

Slowly the driver returned over the trail, seemed about to cross the river, and then wheeled toward the thicket.

He had drawn his revolver and rode on as though about to use it.

The surgeon knew that he had seen him, so wheeling rode boldly toward him.

The driver did not attempt to raise his pistol, as Frank Powell half-suspected he would, and had prepared himself to protect his life by drawing his own weapon.

Silk-Ribbon Sam looked surprised, halted and returned his weapon to his belt.

"Surgeon Powell, were you following me?" he asked.

"Frankly I answer you, Sam, I was."

"Why?"

"I will tell you that it was on account of the interest I feel in you, because you have been ill, and I have wished to watch over you as I would a brother."

The face of the Mad Driver worked strangely.

"I have been ill, and I don't feel just right here," and he pressed his hand upon his head.

"But I do my work, I attend to my duties as I did before—before I—was—ill; do I not?"

"You certainly do."

"But they regard me strangely, all of them, and I have heard them whisper that I was mad."

"I may be, for I do not know what madness is; but I mean no harm to my friends, and wish to go my way in peace."

"I knew some one was to follow me, so I turned back and discovered you."

"I like you, Surgeon Powell, but if you dog my steps again I will kill you as I would a wolf, or you will have to kill me, a poor mad-man."

"You won't follow me any more, will you, Surgeon Powell?"

There was something so touching in his words and in his act of holding out his hand, Frank Powell said quickly and earnestly:

"Upon my honor, no!"

"I will be your friend and protect you."

"Go on your way where you please, for I return at once to Danger Station."

Silk-Ribbon Sam seemed pleased.

A smile crossed his sad face and he replied:

"Thank you."

"Some day I may remember all I would recall."

"Some day I may tell you something; but I cannot think now, I can only act."

"I'll be back to-night."

He wheeled his horse and rode away, and Surgeon Powell at once took the back trail for camp, impressed more than ever with the strange man who had crossed his path.

He returned to Danger Station and Nick Sawyer eagerly greeted him.

"Well, Doc?"

"I followed him, we met, and the poor fellow means no harm."

"I shall not trail him again, and I advise you not to allow any one to do so."

"But Crosby, and Tips?"

"I can tell you nothing about them, and you had best not accuse him."

"The truth is, Sawyer, this man is deranged."

"It may be permanent, perhaps but temporary."

"He has secrets that could end this mystery, but he must be humored, and in good time I believe all will come well, at least I hope so."

"Now, if he did kill Crosby or Tips, where are their bodies?"

"If he goes anywhere for mischief, it has not been proven."

"I tell you the man will do his duty, and do it well, for see how he retook his stage after he was surprised and hurled from it."

"He is to be depended upon in duty, but don't go against him, or you spoil all."

"I believe you are right, Doc, and I will be guided by you, and the boys must do as I say."

"Sam has seen something that unseated his mind, and when he comes to himself he may tell us that which will help us to fathom the mystery as to the manacle."

At dark the Mad Driver returned, and came in to his supper.

He spoke to the surgeon, nodded to the others, ate his supper in silence and went to his quarters.

Powell watched him closely, though not appearing to do so, and noted the continuous movement he had of rubbing his right hand across his forehead as though to brush cobwebs from his brain.

The next morning was Silk-Ribbon Sam's driving day, and when the stage rolled in on time he stood ready, dressed in his best, his gauntlets drawn on, his gold-handled whip in hand.

The driver of the coach drew up and the passengers alighted to change, for Sam had his own stage-coach with six horses for the Red Top run.

There were two passengers, a man, well-dressed, with a smooth-shaven face and the appearance of a gentleman.

He was accompanied by a negro, tall, muscular, and who appeared to be his valet.

As they alighted from the vehicle to take Sam's coach the negro gave a look to Surgeon Powell that his master did not see.

It was full of significance, and Surgeon Powell nodded, as though he understood it, and glanced fixedly at the well-dressed traveler.

The two travelers then entered Sam's coach, and it pulled out from the station on the second of time.

"I was going back to the settlement, Nick, to see my patients; but they must wait until tomorrow, for I shall follow the stage-coach," said Surgeon Powell, as Silk-Ribbon Sam drove off.

"You think Sam is more cranky than usual?"

"Oh, no; I think Sam is all right, but I wish to see just who those two passengers are," was the reply.

And ten minutes after Surgeon Powell rode away from Danger Station on the trail of the stage-coach, the look of the negro having evidently caused him to do so.

Silk-Ribbon Sam knew what speed to take to a fraction, and he never pressed his horses unless there was need for it.

When they neared Red Top the white passenger called out that he and his servant would walk up the mountain road to stretch their legs.

Sam halted, and they got out, the stage rolling on, they slowly following.

A few minutes after Surgeon Powell appeared, and his gaze fell upon a strange scene, one that caused him to spur rapidly forward.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE NEGRO VALET.

It was at one of the back stations on the Overland stage road, that one of the passengers stepped off one day for a rest of a week, he said.

He did not look ill, but expressed himself as utterly broken down.

As he had money in plenty, he got the best room in the little shanty public house at the station, and a negro servant there was engaged to look to his comfort.

The negro was an oddity in his way, tall, muscular, as active as a cat and yet as docile as a kitten.

He had sought work at the station and been given odds and ends to do.

A good cook, he also understood the care of horses, and as a body-servant the strange traveler found him invaluable.

His clothes were brushed, his boots cleaned and fresh water was always kept at hand, while as a concocter of tempting drinks the negro excelled.

"You say your name is Kansas, my man?" said the traveler, who had given his name as Adam Cole.

"Yas, massa, my name are Kansas, sah."

"How did you get that name?"

"Waal, sah, I were a slave nigger, and went wid my massa to de Norf, and my massa die dere."

"Den a gemman tuk me ter Kansas and sot me free; but I hab ter work fer him more harder dan I eber do for ole massa."

"Dey call me Kansas, sah, and it has stuck ter me eber since, though my baptusmul name were Washington, sah."

Kansas and his new master got better acquainted daily, and one day, in confidence the negro told Mr. Adam Cole a secret.

It was as they sat in the room one rainy night, and Mr. Cole was preparing for bed.

"Massa, when you is goin' away, sah?" asked Kansas in a thoughtful mood.

"In a few days."

"I wish you would take me wid you, sah?"

"I don't think I can, Kansas."

"I has been West, sah."

"Indeed! don't you call this West?"

"Yas, sah; but I were kidnapped once by a man as tuk me out farder West, and he were a miner."

"A miner?"

"Yas, sah, and he done hab a gold-mine dere, and he make me work it fer him; but he treat me bad, 'cause he keep a chain on me all de time."

"But one night I break de chain wid a rock, when he were sleepin' an run off."

"He foller me, and come inter de town whar I was."

"Dere were a fight goin' on at de time, and he got shot, so I say nuffin' 'bout knowin' him, and stay dere."

"I hab some gold-dust and sell it; but it all gone now, so I wants ter git back to thet mine and git more."

"You are right, my man."

"Where is this mine?" eagerly asked Adam Cole.

"It are out West, sah, and dere is plenty ob gold dere too, sah."

"Can you find it again?"

"Oh, yas, sah, and as you hab been good to me, massa, I willin' to go dere wid you and share what we gits."

"Done! we'll start in a day or two, Kansas, and we will go in pards on the find."

"We'll be rich as Croesus, won't we?"

Kansas didn't know who Croesus was, but readily assented, and it was arranged they should start, as soon as Mr. Cole received certain letters he was expecting to overtake him there.

Mr. Cole's letters arrived in due time and seemed to interest him deeply.

"We take the first stage West, Kansas," he said cheerily.

Kansas was released from his job by the station-boss, and Mr. Cole paid the fare for the negro and himself from place to place, saying that he hoped to meet some one coming East in the stages, which would prevent his going all the way through.

As they rode along Kansas was wont to talk much of his former boss and the mine, as he called it, though he explained that it was "pocket-mining" they had been engaged in, and it had panned out largely, and he knew where there was much more of the yellow metal just for the picking up.

Arriving at Danger Station Mr. Cole was quite worked up with the idea of soon being the possessor of a large fortune.

As the coach neared Red Top, Kansas was so impressed he talked in whispers, for fear the stage-driver would hear him.

"We better give him de slip, sah."

"How so?"

"Waal, sah, we pertend we wants ter walk up de mountain and git out."

"I kin drap out de satchels fu'st, and den we kin go back and pick 'em up and dodge inter de woods, sah."

"It is near the base of the mountain, then?"

"Not ober-far, sah."

"But the driver may wait for us, Kansas."

"No, sah, he hain't de man ter wait long, and he'll conclood we jist lit out bekase we wanted ter."

"Won't he send men to search for us?"

"No, sah, for what do dey keer about you and a nigger?"

Mr. Cole was convinced and so agreed to the plan of the negro.

The satchels, which had been packed with all needful for a trip in the mountains, and a roll of blankets, were tied to a string, lowered from the stage window and let go without a sound.

When out of sight of them in the winding road, Mr. Cole had called out to Silk-Ribbon Sam that they would walk up the mountain.

"The truth is, driver, I am a surveyor, and I wish to look at the country hereabout."

"In fact, driver, I might be tempted to lay off and await your return."

Silk-Ribbon Sam made no reply.

He did not care what his passengers did, and Mr. Cole and his servant were left trudging up the trail.

Once the stage-coach was out of sight they turned back and soon gathered up the heavy roll of blankets and two satchels.

Mr. Cole had his rifle with him and a pair of revolvers, and Kansas was armed with a pair of Colt's navies and an ugly looking bowie-knife.

"We is goin' loaded for b'ar," he had explained to them at the station where Mr. Cole had found him.

Having gotten the traps together, they deposited them on the side of the trail, while, to the horror of Mr. Adam Cole, Kansas suddenly drew a revolver, thrust it into his face and said:

"Boss, you is my pris'ner fer keeps!"

Mr. Cole was amazed, indignant, frightened. What did it mean?

He asked the question with a prefix.

"You black rascal, what does this mean?"

"It means, boss, dat your rifle hain't loaded, neither is yer other weepins, and you is my pris'ner."

"What for?"

"I tole yer, sah, arter while; but now I has ter tie a rope around your waist and we'll git a long pole and sling de baggage and your weepins on it, and you walk in front and I behind, and we tote 'em up de mountain."

"You are an infamous black dog!" and Mr. Cole fairly ground his teeth.

"Dogs has four legs, boss, an' I has but two; but I hain't goin' ter quarrel wid yer, for I is too glad to quarrel jist now."

Adam Cole made a movement as though to spring upon the negro.

But the revolver was raised full in his face and the words came sternly:

"Fore God, boss, I done kill yer if yer cuts up eber so leetle."

It was at this moment that Surgeon Frank Powell, riding around a bend in the trail came upon the scene.

CHAPTER XXXII.

BUFFALO BILL'S SABLE DETECTIVE.

ADAM COLE welcomed the appearance of the horseman with delight.

He saw that the rider wore a uniform.

It was the same splendid-looking man he had noticed back at the station, and whom he had been told by a stable-boy, was an army surgeon.

Now the negro should repent his daring act against him.

"You will rue this, you scoundrel, for there comes one who will quickly release me," he hissed.

Kansas cast a glance over his shoulder, saw the horseman, now approaching at a gallop, and laughed.

The next moment the horseman rode up and halted.

"Well, what does this mean?" he asked, and there was a smile upon his lips that showed he appreciated the situation.

"It means, captain, that this black imp of Hades inveigled me out of the coach at this point and then, having unloaded my weapons, covers me with his and says I am his prisoner."

"And what have you to say, Kansas?"

"You know the rascal?" asked Adam Cole in surprise.

"We have met before, sir; but, Kansas, what is the cause of your harsh treatment of this gentleman?"

Kansas smiled, and when he replied, Mr. Adam Cole was surprised to find that he did not use the ignorant negro dialect in which he had before always spoken to him.

"I think I have one here, sir, that you will find valuable."

"Will you search him while I hold him under cover, Surgeon Powell?"

"Better wait until we reach Red Top, Kansas."

"He might destroy some papers, sir."

"Ah! we will see to that," and Surgeon Powell dismounted.

"You are in league, sir, with this black scamp!" indignantly said Adam Cole.

"This man, sir, is under my orders just now, and we will take you to one whose commands I am obeying."

"Hold up your hands, sir!"

The man drew back, but Frank Powell seized him in a grip of iron and quickly clasped upon his wrists a pair of slender steel manacles.

"Now, sir, we will go up to the mountain-top," he said, and he led the way on foot, grasping the arm of the prisoner, while Kansas fastened the luggage on the surgeon's horse and followed with him.

It was a long, slow climb to the top, and when they reached it the coach had gone.

The prisoner had become very pale, and he showed that he was deeply moved.

The surgeon placed a turkey-bone whistle to his lips and gave a long, loud call.

It was promptly answered from a short distance off, and Buffalo Bill, in his soldier uniform, appeared.

"Why, Frank, I am delighted to see you."

"And you also, Kansas."

"A prisoner, it seems?"

The scout shook hands with Surgeon Powell, and then with the negro.

"It is some game of Kansas's bagging, Bill, and I know nothing about his reasons," said Frank Powell.

"I'll tell you, Mister Bill; this man is a spy for the road-agents, who call themselves Red-men."

"Ha! you know this, Kansas?"

"Yes, Mister Bill, he is, and I'm not afraid to talk out, as I know he cannot escape."

"It's a lie! that negro has plotted to kill me," said the prisoner.

"Tell us about him, Kansas," said Buffalo Bill, quietly.

"Well, sir, I went to Blackwood Station Settlement, as you ordered me, and got work."

"This man came along in the coach one day, and said he wanted to rest there for a week, and he engaged me to take care of him."

"I played the ignorant-nigger joke on him, and brushed up his clothes and looked after his comfort, and told him a story all about a mine I knew out here," and Kansas laughed.

"It took him in, sir, and I got him to bring me along, and we left the stage at the foot of Red Top to go and look after the mine."

"But what have you against him, Kansas?"

"Well, Mister Bill, he didn't know I could read, I was such an ignorant nigger, you know, and so I saw some papers he had, and more than that, sir, I saw his watch and chain."

"What of the papers?"

"They give reports of the stages and passengers they carry westward, and valuables, if they have any."

"Aha!"

"And he got some papers the day we left Blackwood Station, which he was waiting for."

"I read enough of them to see that they reported a passenger going West with a large amount of money, and to hit Round Top here about day after to-morrow."

"This is useful information, Powell."

"It is, indeed, Bill."

"It is all a lie," hissed the prisoner.

"Now, Mister Bill, I wouldn't make a mistake for a great deal of money, and I have not done so now."

"This man is a spy for the Red-men, and more, sir, he has on now the watch and chain given to Silk-Ribbon Sam for the best driver on the Overland."

Buffalo Bill tore open the tightly-buttoned up coat of the prisoner, who became perfectly livid.

There about his neck was the massive watch-chain, and in his vest-pocket was the watch. It had engraved on it:

"To

"SILK-RIBBON SAM,

"Champion Driver of the Overland."

Then followed a score of names of the donors.

"This is very damning evidence against you, sir, and I will now see what the papers will show," said Buffalo Bill, sternly.

"I bought the watch and chain from a miner a few days ago."

"He told me it was given to him a long time ago, for he didn't know I could read," Kansas chipped in.

The man showed an inclination to resist being searched, but Frank Powell seized him upon one side, and Kansas on the other, and held him as in a vise.

Then Buffalo Bill searched him thoroughly.

A number of papers were found, a small bag of jewelry, and several hundred dollars in gold and bills.

"Let us look at these papers," and the scout glanced over them for a few minutes in silence.

Then he said:

"Kansas, you are right, for this man is a spy for the Red Riders, and a most valuable capture."

"You have done some splendid detective work, and I will get you to return to the same post of duty, and there is no need to tell you to keep your eyes open, for you will."

Then turning to the prisoner, Buffalo Bill continued:

"Now, sir, what have you to say for yourself?"

"Those papers and all are not mine."

"I met a man who was sick and nursed him until he died, and then I took his clothes and things."

"No, that won't do, sir, for you are the spy of the Red-men, and there is but one way to save your neck from the noose."

"What way is that?"

"Lead me and my men to the retreat in the Wild Range."

"Who says they are in the Wild Range?"

"I know it."

"Then find them there yourself."

"Oh, no, for you would have me run in on a camp of red-skins."

"I tell you, sir, that you have to guide me and my Mounted Detectives to the retreat of the Red-men, or you will hang for it."

"I will not betray my comrades."

"You confess to being a Red Rider?"

"Yes."

"And refuse to betray them?"

"I do."

"You save your life by doing so."

"I can die but once."

"I will send you to the fort and have you executed."

"Do so, I can die with my lips sealed."

"You are a brave fellow; but it is to do as I say or die."

"No use, Bill, for I tried the prisoners back at the station, the one you sent and those who attempted to rescue him, and it would do no good."

"They could not be frightened into confessing."

This was said in a low tone, that the prisoner did not hear.

"Kansas!"

"Yes, Mister Bill."

"Give me the lariat on the surgeon's horse."

This was done.

"Prisoner, upon consideration I will not send you to the fort, for you might escape."

"I'll hang you now, unless you accept my terms, to go free as soon as you have shown me the haunt of the Red Riders."

"I will die first."

"We shall see."

"Kansas, throw that lariat over that limb, and make the end fast around the horn of the doctor's saddle."

"Yes, sir."

"Now, sir, here is a hangman's noose for your neck."

"Will you do as I demand?" and the noose was thrown over the neck of the prisoner and drawn tight.

"No!"

The word was firmly uttered though the man was deathly pale.

"Then your death be upon your head, not mine—"

"So be it."

"Lead up the horse, Kansas."

The negro obeyed, and the lariat became taut.

But there was a look upon the face of the Red Rider which Buffalo Bill, Surgeon Powell and Kansas read aright—he would die rather than betray his comrades.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE SCOUT'S LAST ALLY.

SEEING that he could not force the prisoner through fear, into doing as he demanded, Buf-

falo Bill, who had had no idea of hanging him, took the noose from about his neck and said:

"You are a brave man, and one who should be engaged in honorable work, not outlawry."

"But you must return with Surgeon Powell as a prisoner, and one of these days you'll regret not accepting my terms and saving your life."

"If you think you can intrap the Red-men you are mistaken," was the reply.

"We shall see," returned Buffalo Bill.

It was then decided that it would be best for the three, Surgeon Powell, Kansas and the prisoner to start at once for Danger Station, and there horses could be procured to take them on to the settlement, where the prisoner was to be kept with those already there.

"Silk-Ribbon might kill him, if he recognized him as one of his assailants, and was told he had his watch and chain."

"I'll give these to Sam on his return, and you take charge of the other things; but be sure not one of the prisoners escapes or we will lose all we have gained thus far," said Buffalo Bill.

Soon after the three departed, the prisoner riding Powell's horse and the surgeon and Kansas walking by his side.

It was a surprise party when they reached Danger Station; but Surgeon Powell said a few words to Nick Sawyer in a low tone, and one of the men soon rode up leading two other horses.

Mounting, they rode away, Powell, the prisoner, Kansas and the man to bring the horses back, and before dawn Adam Cole found himself in the company of several other suspected Red-men.

But though Surgeon Powell and Kansas watched them closely they saw not the slightest sign of recognition between any of them already there and the new-comer.

Matters were certainly shaping themselves satisfactorily for Buffalo Bill, for thus far his detectives, with Surgeon Powell as the head and front of the scouts, soldiers, Chinese and negro scattered along the line at the different stations, were beginning to prove pretty conclusively that the Red-men had a pretty good organization for outlawry.

From his four scouts and six soldiers Buffalo Bill had received communications which were to the point, as to what discoveries they had made; but the Chinese, Buckskin, and negro, Kansas, had been the ones to render the most service thus far, excepting, of course, Surgeon Powell, who had certainly proven himself the right man in the right place for secret service work.

The next day when Silk-Ribbon Sam came on his eastward run to Red Top, he drew rein, as was his wont, near the graves of the five murdered passengers.

He was alone, not a passenger being in the coach, and he dropped his hand upon his revolver as he saw a form coming through the timber.

But he recognized the soldier whom he had before seen at that point, and awaited his approach.

He had never met Buffalo Bill, so did not connect the scout in any way with the man in uniform who seemed to haunt Red Top like a spirit.

The scout spoke politely and said:

"You are Silk-Ribbon Sam, I believe?"

"So men call me, sir."

"Pardon me for touching upon a painful remembrance, but you had charge of the coach when the massacre here took place?"

"Yes," and the face grew dark and stern.

"I met you back at the settlement, and again here the other day, though you seem not to remember me."

"Your papers stated that you were a soldier and were acting under orders from General Miles."

"Yes, and I must thank you for carrying my prisoner through the other day against such odds."

"I only did my duty."

"May I trust you?"

"Certainly."

"I am trying to find out who did this foul murder, for you, having been wounded by the first fire, doubtless, can tell me nothing."

"I can tell nothing."

"I don't remember," and again he passed his hand across his forehead as though in vain trying to recall the scene.

"You lost a watch and chain that day?"

"Yes."

"Did you lose any money?"

"I had a buckskin bag of gold—it is gone," and he felt in his pocket.

"Is this it?"

The scout held up the bag of gold he had taken from Adam Cole.

"Ah, yes!"

"Take it, for it is yours, your name having been marked in the bottom of the bag."

He took the bag mechanically, thrust it into his pocket, and said:

"Thank you; but where did you find it?"

"I took it from a prisoner."

"My God! I would kill that man could I find him, for he could tell me all."

He began to grow excited, and Buffalo Bill said:

"He is safe, and some day you shall see him; but here is your watch, and chain."

He eagerly grasped the handsome watch, with its massive chain, threw the latter about his neck, thrust the former into his pocket, and was about to drive on without a word, when the scout said:

"Sam, I got your watch from a prisoner, whom you shall some day see; but I want you to do me a favor."

"Oh, certainly."

"I want you to bring me any letter that may be handed to you for me."

"It will be addressed simply to Red Top, and as you drive beneath yonder limb, place it on it for me, for I can reach it, and a pin will hold it fast."

"As you come back each time, look there for a letter, and it will be addressed to Surgeon Powell, so if he is not at Danger Station, give it to Nick Sawyer to send to him."

"Will you do this for me?"

"Yes."

"You will not speak of it to any one?"

"No."

"Thank you."

"You will help me to find those murderers some day, won't you?" and he spoke so pleadingly that Buffalo Bill was deeply touched.

"Yes, I will."

Without a word he drove off, leaving Buffalo Bill regarding him with an expression of pity upon his fine face.

"And can it be that that splendid man is a mental wreck?"

"Will he never recover?"

"Well, it is certain that if Red-men did this deed they were not Indians—no, they were the Red Riders of the Rockies, and they must be run to earth, each one and all of them."

So saying, Buffalo Bill retraced his way back into the timber to his lonely camp.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A WOMAN IN BLACK.

Two weeks passed away, and matters remained about the same along the Overland.

At the settlement station Surgeon Powell still had his quarters and received his communications, whether important or otherwise, from the amateur detectives of Buffalo Bill along the line.

He had called the Chinese, Buckskin, and the negro, Kansas, to the settlement to help him, as he said, nurse the wounded prisoners, but it was in reality to guard them, and he knew that he could trust to them that they would not get away.

Adam Cole, as well as the others, had offered large sums to let them go, and Surgeon Powell was afraid that some of the stablemen, who had acted as guards, might be tempted to do so and skip with them.

He knew that Buckskin and Kansas had been too thoroughly tried many times, and could be trusted.

Though they had listened at all times, not a word had they heard pass between the prisoners to compromise them.

They could not catch the slightest hint as to what the men had been before their capture, and yet Surgeon Powell was convinced that they were Red men.

Passengers had gone west and eastward daily, several times a stage-load of them, but nothing more had transpired to aid in the plot to unravel the Red Top mystery.

True to his word, Silk-Ribbon Sam had carried letters and left them where Buffalo Bill had told him, and found letters there to carry back, but nothing had come of it.

He had not seen the scout—soldier as he supposed—since that afternoon when he returned him his watch, but he seemed to feel that he was still haunting Red Top.

The Mad Driver had not even spoken to Nick Sawyer or Surgeon Powell of having gotten his watch back.

He seemed hardly to remember that he had been robbed of it; but the men at the stations saw it and wondered.

It seemed to imply that Silk-Ribbon Sam had found the robber himself and that he had made short work of him no one doubted.

One night the coach pulled out of Valley Station on its run back to Danger Station.

Silk-Ribbon Sam was on the box as usual, and the coach that had come in had brought three passengers, two rough-looking men, evidently miners, and one woman in deep black and heavily veiled.

The two men were heavily armed, and with a politeness that seemed appreciated, gave the female passenger the back seat to herself.

"Sam, there's a lot of treasure for you this run," said the driver who came in from the westward, and he banded two large bags of gold over to the Mad Driver, who placed them under the back seat, unnoticed by the woman, who was having supper in the cabin.

The two men stood watching the transfer, however, though in an indifferent kind of manner, and soon after the coach rolled off on its trip over Red Top to Danger Station—a ninety-mile run.

Just as dawn broke the summit of Red Top

was reached, and the two men and the woman appeared to be asleep.

Silk-Ribbon Sam halted for a moment under the tree, felt for a letter, found none and drove on, commencing the perilous descent of the mountain.

Then the woman awoke, and a lurch of the stage aroused the men.

The moment they did so they looked at each other, then at the woman and seemed amazed.

Their revolvers had been removed from their belts in some mysterious manner, and their knives too.

There sat the woman opposite to them, with a revolver in each hand, one covering each, the veil thrown back, revealing a man's face, stern, sinister and threatening.

"Gentlemen, if you speak above a whisper, you die, so help me Heaven!"

The men did not speak at all.

They knew it was so easy, at that close range, to let fly two shots, killing them, and then shoot the driver before he could do aught to prevent.

"My friend, on the seat in front of you is a pair of handcuffs, you observe."

"Take them and place them on the wrists of your comrade, and make no mistake!"

The man sullenly obeyed.

"Now, sir, you place the other pair upon one of your wrists, and I will put the other on."

The second man obeyed in sullen silence, and holding his revolver at a cover, the one who had suddenly been metamorphosed into a daring man from a supposed woman, clasped the other wristlet on and the two men were ironed securely.

"Now, gentlemen, I must inflict another indignity upon you; place your feet upon this bench in front of you!"

This they did.

They dared not refuse, and their ankles were ironed and a chain made fast to the manacles on their wrists.

Ropes were then passed around their bodies, holding their arms pinioned, and gags, taken from the seat by the bold fellow in their front, were forced into their mouths and made fast behind their heads.

Then the pretended woman drew from beneath the veil a small, sharp saw and knife, with an auger.

The latter made four holes in the back of the coach, and the saw quickly cut out a panel some two feet square, close down to the top of the cushioned seat.

There was but one trunk in the boot, the baggage claimed by the pretended woman, and the man said with a smile:

"It has only trash in it, so I don't want it."

"See! I leave you my feminine apparel," and the dress, bonnet and cloak were slipped off, leaving to view a man with a remarkably handsome face, a slender, wiry form, dressed in a black velvet jacket and knee-pants of the same, top-boots, and a slouch hat, taken from beneath the woman's cloak, was put upon his head, giving him a jaunty, reckless look.

From beneath the seat the two bags of gold were taken, and the bold robber leant out through the hole he had made, cut a long slash in the leather boot, put the bags through, and then followed.

"Good-morning, gentlemen, and give my compliments to Silk-Ribbon Sam."

"Tell him that an old friend wishes him well, and has much to thank him for."

He spoke in a low tone, the coach going down the steep grade the while, and looking out through the cut in the leather boot, he watched his chance, and with a bag of gold in each hand, slipped out, darting quickly out of sight, should Silk-Ribbon Sam look back, behind a large rock.

And all unconscious of what had happened, Silk-Ribbon Sam drove on toward Danger Station.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE DISCOVERY.

SHORTLY before the arrival of Silk-Ribbon Sam's coach in Danger Station, on the day of the strange and daring robbery on Red Top, by one who had been supposed to be a woman, Surgeon Frank Powell rode up to Nick Sawyer's cabin.

The surgeon had communicated regularly with Captain Carrol at the fort, and also with Colonel Cassidy, explaining the situation from time to time, and also stating that Buffalo Bill and his men were all on the alert and working toward one end.

Every other day, for something better to do, Frank Powell rode up to Danger Station.

His wounded prisoners were doing well, and with Buckskin and Kansas in special charge of them, there was no fear of their escape.

Doctor Dunn, alias "Pills," was not as pleasant company as the surgeon would have selected, while Nick Sawyer was a very companionable fellow.

So it was that the surgeon made frequent visits to Danger Station, carrying his rifle along for game as well, and also he was desirous of seeing as much of Silk-Ribbon Sam as possible and studying his strange case.

"No news, Doc?" asked Nick Sawyer as the surgeon dismounted.

"None; have you any?"

"No more than by last coach I had a station-agent's letter to look out for some treasure by the coach next trip."

"It is now about due, and I was told that it belonged to a rich firm, and two guards, pretending to be miners, would come along with it. Ah! there's Sam's horn now."

The sound of the horn rung down the mountain-side, and the stable-boys sprang to get their fresh horses ready hitched to the coach that was to go on from there under another driver, for Silk-Ribbon Sam, his coach and horses were all "specials" for that part of the run over Red Top.

A moment after the rattle of wheels was heard, and just to the quarter of a minute Silk-Ribbon Sam drew up before the cabin at Danger Station.

"No letter, sir, and no special instructions; but there are two bags containing twenty thousand in gold and a couple of guards with it with one lady passenger."

So said Silk-Ribbon Sam as he sprang from the box, and he spoke to Nick Sawyer.

He was going off toward his cabin, with a bow to Surgeon Powell, when Nick Sawyer threw open the stage-door, and his exclamation of alarm caused him to turn back.

"Great heavens! Sam, what does this mean?"

The Mad Driver sprang back to the coach, saw the gagged men, the irons upon them, the hole cut in the back of the coach and the slit in the leather boot.

His face turned deathly pale, and the same old habit of running his hand over his forehead he repeated again and again, while he said:

"I don't know; I don't know, for I can't remember."

"It means," said Surgeon Powell, anxious to relieve the strain upon him, "that you had a wolf in sheep's clothing, for where is your lady passenger, and he has robbed you."

He cut the gag-cords from the two men as he spoke, ordered water brought to them, and helped them out of the coach, the Mad Driver standing by in silent amazement the while.

"Well, what has happened, men?" said the surgeon, as the two, after a few swallows of water, were able to speak.

"The one we thought to be a woman proved to be a man, and he chloroformed us while we slept, disarmed, bound and gagged us."

"Then he cut that hole in the back of the coach, took the money out from under the seat, and escaped by cutting the boot."

"Where was I?" asked Ribbon Sam.

"On the box; but you are not to blame, for the wheels drowned the sound of the saw and not the slightest noise was made."

Sam turned silently away, then looked back and said:

"It was the woman?"

"Yes, the pretended woman."

He walked away, and Nick Sawyer said:

"You were the guards of this treasure?"

"Yes, we were taking it through until we could get beyond danger."

"It belonged to us."

"Then let us mount and go back to the spot where the bold robber left you."

"There we can strike his trail, and he cannot travel fast with that weight."

"You will go, Nick?"

"Yes, Surgeon Powell, and we four will be enough, for you know there is another on Red Top if we need him."

Ten minutes after, well armed and mounted, the two passengers, Surgeon Powell and Nick Sawyer, were going at a gallop toward Red Top.

The very spot was found, as the men remembered it, bound as they were and cramped in position, and the Surgeon Scout went in search of the trail with the skill of an Indian.

It had been some hours since the robber had gotten off with his treasure, but the scout found the trail after some search, and discovered that it went around the mountain, turning into a deer path.

Not even the two men did he care to have know that Buffalo Bill was in the neighborhood, and so he did not care to have his discovery of the trail known, so he sent Nick Sawyer and the others in a different direction, to search, and then springing upon his horse, rode rapidly up the Overland Trail to Red Top.

It was not more than a mile, and he there gave the signal agreed upon with the scout.

It was answered from afar off, and riding in that direction, he soon met Buffalo Bill coming from his secret camp.

"Well, Frank, glad to see you."

"Any news?"

"Did you see the coach go by this morning, Bill?"

"Yes, from yonder thicket, and there was a woman on the back seat, two men on the front."

"It was just daylight, and no letter was left for me."

"That was not a woman, Bill."

"The deuce! what's to pay?"

"It was as bold a robber as ever stole gold," and Frank Powell told Bill all that had happened.

"Now, Bill, the two men with me, who were robbed, need not know you are here, for they might unintentionally give it away, so I left them searching down the mountain-side with Nick Sawyer, while I came here after you.

"I did not give it away that I found the trail, though of course I will tell Sawyer; but I did find it, and it led into a deer trail around the mountain.

"I will leave marks there so you will understand, and not have to search for it, and if you follow rapidly I believe you can catch your game before, or by night in camp.

"He is weighted down by the gold-bags, and cannot travel fast, and I suppose is alone, and making for the Red Riders' retreat, for he is doubtless one of them, or why leave the coach here?"

"You are right, and I will go at once in chase.

"You say he told the men to give his compliments to Silk-Ribbon Sam, who was an old friend?"

"Yes."

"What did Sam say?"

"Nothing, for the poor fellow seemed dazed."

"These two men own the gold?"

"Yes."

"Then there can be no trickery?"

"Not that I can see."

"You say he was dressed in velvet jacket and pants, top-boots and light slouch hat?"

"Yes."

"And a handsome fellow?"

"Yes, so the men said."

"This answers the description I have heard given of the chief of the Red Riders from one who traveled with him for a couple of days, and afterward found out that he was the leader of the Red-men."

"It is doubtless he, from the boldness of the deed he accomplished; but now, I will return, and you will follow leisurely, for we will go as soon as I get back, and leave the field to you."

"All right. I will get my horse and follow at once."

"Anything new along the line?"

"No."

"Send me some supplies by Sam next time the coach comes through without any passengers."

"All right. I will do so."

"How are the prisoners?"

"All right, and Buckskin and Kansas the best of guards; but I must be off."

The two friends grasped hands and parted, and the surgeon returned down the hill, made some signs that would attract the eagle eye of Buffalo Bill, and then sought the two men and Nick Sawyer.

"We must give it up," he said with an accent on the pronoun, and then added:

"But I do not despair, for I happened to meet one of the fort scouts, the best trailer on the frontier, and explained the situation to him, and, as soon as he can he will take the trail."

The men seemed pleased at this, and one said:

"There's a scout at the fort we saw when we was in the lower mines, who could trail a bird, and if we could only get him we would be sure he'd hunt out the retreat of that robber."

"His name was Buffalo Bill," remarked the other.

"How strange a coincidence, for that was the scout I met."

"Then our gold is not gone," said one of the men with delight.

"You know Buffalo Bill then?"

"No, doctor, only as much as seeing him in the mines now and then; but we have heard of him for a long time and he's their boss on this border, as you said."

"I feel better," the other miner said as they rode on, and Frank Powell and Nick Sawyer both felt that they had reason to hope that they would recover their gold with Buffalo Bill on the trail of the robber.

The fact that the scout was encamped on the Red Top, haunting the scene of the stage-coach massacre, Surgeon Powell had carefully concealed, as the reader has seen, from the two miners.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

ON THE GOLD TRAIL.

THE Surgeon Scout had not left Red Top but a few minutes, when Buffalo Bill appeared, mounted upon his splendid horse, Black Boy.

He was prepared for a several days' ride, for he carried his roll of blankets and haversack of provisions.

He rode down the Overland Trail until his keen eyes fell upon the signs left by Surgeon Powell.

Then he dismounted, looked about for a moment, and as though satisfied with what he had discovered, he rode away along the deer-trail leading around the mountain.

"The stage passed here soon after daybreak and then the robber left it."

"Now it is just two o'clock, and that gives the fellow some eight hours' start."

"If he has no horse near, nor aid, carrying the weight he does over this trail, he cannot make over two miles, perhaps three, an hour, so he is some twenty miles ahead of me, if he can keep it up."

"We can make that in two hours and a half, Black Boy, if the trail remains clear, so move ahead."

Thus saying, the scout urged Black Boy ahead at a swinging walk.

He went slow where the trail was bad, and in a canter where good; but with almost instinct, it seemed, he followed the trail left by the gold-robber.

He lost it at places, but regained it.

Here the man had halted by a brook, there he had set the bags down to rest, as a displaced stone would show, and in soft earth his track sunk deep.

He had, after a mile from the starting-point, made no great effort to hide his trail, doubtless feeling assured that there was no one who could track him.

After a ride of an hour, the trail turned into a canyon.

"Aha!" said Buffalo Bill, as though he understood just what was coming.

He rode on for a short distance up the canyon, which divided into a number of small ones, branching off upon either side.

Down one there flowed a small stream.

It was from a spring, and soon, across the canyon, the scout discovered a rude fence made of saplings.

One end was down, as though there was no longer need for it to be kept up, and Buffalo Bill soon saw that a horse had been pastured in the space beyond for several days.

"I see, he had his eye on those two miners, knew about the time they were going to start East with their treasure, came here and left his horse, footed it to one of the stations and caught the coach, cleverly got the gold, and is on his way to the den of the Red Riders with it."

"It is all as plain as daylight, and I'm glad I've got the trail of a horse to follow now, for I can track him right into his retreat."

"Come, Black Boy, he will go slow with those gold-bags, so we will push on."

And, having watered his horse, the scout mounted and followed the hoof-tracks, which he had noticed coming in, leading out of the canyon.

By the hoof-marks Buffalo Bill could tell the gait the horse had been kept in, and he soon saw that the rider had gone at a far faster gait than he had expected he would.

So he pushed Black Boy into a swift gallop and held him at it.

That he gained upon the man was evident, for the trail grew fresher, and at a creek he crossed he saw that the rocks on the other side were still wet from the dripping hoofs of the horse.

But the sun had set, and before very long it was too dark to follow the trail.

He dared not push on, for fear he would go wrong, and so he determined to camp on the trail and await the dawn.

He returned to the brook, a mile distant, where he had noted a good camping-place some little distance off the track, with water and grass in plenty, and, lariatting his horse out, made a small fire among the rocks and cooked his supper of coffee, crackers, some bacon and venison.

He slept soundly through the night, awoke just before dawn, ate his breakfast, and was at the spot where he had given up the trail by the time it was daylight.

Then he pushed on once more, going slowly, and as he went along saw that the man he was in pursuit of had not halted for the night, as he had.

His gait had been, however, brought down to a walk, the scout saw, but he had gone on like one who knew just where he was going and was acquainted with his surroundings.

"It leads to the Wild Range, as I suspected."

"He is a Red Rider, and now is my chance to follow his trail to his den."

So saying the scout halted for his dinner.

He staked out his horse, then walked off with a bundle in his arms, a blanket containing certain things he cared not to carry into the outlaws' camp with him.

"It isn't likely a deserter, who escaped from the fort, would have some of the things I have with me, so, as I may be searched, I will just hide them for future reference," and Buffalo Bill found a good place and cached the blanket and what it contained.

Having eaten his dinner, he once more resumed his trailing and went on his way as Dave Dawson, the Sergeant Deserter.

The country about him was wild in the extreme, and grew more so as he went on.

He passed the canyon where he had before turned back when following the trail of the Red-men, and saw that the one he followed held on into the Wild Range.

The track was plain here, from the nature of the ground, and he pressed on rapidly, not caring to spare his horse then, and wishing him to appear as though hard-ridden.

He was also anxious to reach the den of the Red-men before nightfall.

Further and further into the Wild Range he went, and still following the trail he had so persistently pursued.

He could well understand why the Red-men had selected a spot so well-calculated to hide in and against pursuit and for defense.

It was near sunset when he suddenly rode upon a picket, and a rifle-bullet whizzed by his ears the instant he had seen the man.

Quickly Buffalo Bill threw his hands above his head and cried out:

"Hold, pard, I'm no foe!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

KING VELVET PLAYS A NEW GAME.

WHEN King Velvet, the gambler, left Shanty Paradise, it will be remembered that he was in hard luck.

His severe wound had taken so long to heal that his money had been spent, and luck seemed against him at the gaming-table.

So he had departed from Shanty Paradise to seek new fields of fortune and adventure.

The fortune however seemed to shun the gambler, and he drifted from place to place, always in bad luck, until he at last had to sell his horse.

He got a good price for the animal and decided to take the stage further west on the Overland, hoping yet to find good fortune.

Once he could do that he would be able to carry out his cherished hope of running to earth the one who had defended the old man that night in the Golden Luck Saloon, who had given him the wound which had so nearly cost him his life.

He took the stage from a mining-camp and found four other passengers on board.

These were miners, and confident of their strength, they talked of their affairs.

They had been working in the mines, had shipped considerable money to their homes, and with each a snug sum in yellow metal with him, they were on their way to those they loved.

They looked upon their fellow-traveler as a young "tenderfoot," traveling for his health, and one unaccustomed to the ways of the West, and they were delighted at seeing his fright, as they supposed, at their wild stories of border life.

"Are there robbers on this road?" innocently asked the gambler.

"Robbers? Waal, now, there be, ef yer calls road-agents robbers, and thar's a gang as they cognomens ther Red-men."

"Indians?" asked King Velvet.

"Injuns be durned! No, young feller, they is Red-men, white road-agents they calls Red Riders o' ther Rockies, 'cause they is guilty o' sich red deeds."

"Would they rob us?"

"Waal, now, they would; but you wouldn't know nothin' about it."

"Why?"

"'Cause they'd kill yer fu'st."

The gambler shuddered, and said:

"I've got considerable money about me."

"Waal, yer would be likely ter lose it, ef yer wasn't with us."

"But we is walking gun factories, and no Red-men kin come it over us."

"Where are they?"

"They hangs out ahead on ther trail, some few stations from here, near a big mountain, I hears."

The men smiled at the seeming fright of their gorgeously dressed fellow-traveler, and he said:

"I should think you'd be scared, for you said you had nearly five thousand dollars with you?"

"Yas, I has about that. Bun here has half as much, and my two other pards as much more."

"Oh, we kin scrape up pretty near ten thousand atween us, so you may know we hain't goin' ter be robbed."

"And won't let them rob me?"

"No, my son," said the miner, who had been chief spokesman, with a most patronizing air.

After a while the gambler said it made him sick to ride inside the coach, so leant out and asked the driver to let him ride upon the box with him.

The permission was granted, and King Velvet soon sat by Doc Stevens, the driver.

He asked so many questions that Doc, a surly fellow at best, cursed him as a nuisance, and said:

"Say, Velvet Cost, you'd stop a clock with yer constant chin-chin—yer beats any woman I ever see, an' I has know'd a few petticoats in my day."

"I didn't mean to make you angry, sir, but I wanted to learn all I could about stage-driving on the Overland, and the Red-men," said King Velvet, meekly.

"Ther least yer knows about ther Red Riders ther better for yer," was the sullen response.

"Take a drink, sir, for I have some good brandy with me."

"The doctor prescribes it for me, you know."

This invitation was a home shot.

Doc Stevens loved liquor as he did himself.

"Waal, now, I'll sample a leetle of the medicine," said the driver.

The traps of the gambler, with his saddle and

bridle, were on the top of the coach, and he crawled toward them.

He seemed a long time getting at the flask, and had Doc Stevens seen what he was doing, he would indeed have called it "medicine."

The truth was, King Velvet had a drug in his traps, and he put some of this in the flask of brandy.

"You'll find that the best cognac, sir; it cost thirty dollars a gallon in New York."

"Thirty dollars a gallon! Why, it must be liquid gold, and maybe it will spoil my throat."

"No, sir; but it will do you good."

The driver put the flask to his lips.

He played "old toper" on the gambler, letting some of the liquor run down his throat without swallowing, King Velvet awkwardly holding the reins the while.

"That's spirit fit fer angels ter spree on, pard," he said, with a loud smack of his lips.

The gambler pretended to drink, but he did not allow a drop to pass his lips.

"Take another swallow, sir, before I put it up."

"I'll do it."

And the swallow meant half a dozen.

Then they drove a little distance, and King Velvet said:

"I hate to be mean, so I'll ask the gentlemen in the coach to take a swallow."

"Yer'll never see a drop o' it ag'in."

"I've got more."

"All right."

And so the gambler hailed the miners, leant over and passed the flask.

"Will you take a drink, gentlemen?"

"It's brandy."

"Will we? Brandy! Well, now, try us."

The flask went in two-thirds full.

It was returned in the condition that Doc Stevens had prophesied.

"Durn it, can't I keep awake?" suddenly cried Doc Stevens.

"I'm that sleepy I kin hardly keep my eyes—"

He reeled and would have fallen from the box had not King Velvet caught him and laid him back upon the stage-top.

He had become wholly unconscious.

The gambler took the reins, and he no longer appeared awkward.

He drove like one who had long understood the art of handling a team.

Suddenly, as the trail wound among a heap of bowlders, half-hidden with bushes, King Velvet drew rein.

He dismounted, approached the stage-door and threw it open.

One of the four miners was fast asleep, another nodding, a third looking dazed, and the fourth who had drank but little, was hardly under the influence of the drug put in the flask of brandy.

"Gentlemen, hands up! I am the chief of the Red Riders, and my men have you surrounded, and cover you from those rocks."

"Hands up, I say!"

"Oh, Lord!"

The words broke from the lips of the man who was himself, and he was enough himself to obey, for up to the top of the coach went his hands.

The gambler sprung upon the step, and disarmed him and the others.

"Now, sir, you get out and lie down flat upon your face—quick! for your driver is dead on his box, and my men but await my word to kill you!"

The man scrambled out, and half-dazed, the other, who could move, followed.

"Lie down flat!"

They obeyed and a rope was quickly tied about their arms.

Then the bold robber threw the drugged men off the back seat, raised the cushion and took out the bags of gold.

"The smallest of these I will leave you, to carry you home, where, by your own words you have plenty more."

"Divide it equally among you."

"The balance I will take as toll, and let me advise you not to make such a mistake again as to pick up a frontiersman for a tenderfoot," and the gambler laughed lightly, while the two miners, their fear and anger overcoming the drug, lay still, expecting a volley of bullets to riddle them from unseen foes, if they moved.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

DARING WINS.

As though he had just made a discovery that pleased him, the gambler said aloud:

"Ah! that off leader is a splendid horse, as also is his mate."

"I will take them for my use—here, men, unhitch those leaders—no, I'll do it, and you keep your rifles on those fellows, and fire if they move."

Those two miners said afterward, that they never expected to lie as still when dead, as they did then.

King Velvet quickly sprung upon the stage, took down his traps, saddle and bridle, and soon had one of the leaders saddled and bridled.

The other one made his pack-horse, taking certain things he thought he might need, and

placing them, with his traps and the gold upon the animal.

"Now, gentlemen, I will leave you, but beware not to move for some time, for a man shall be left to watch."

"I've unhitched the horses from the coach, so they will be all right, and I may as well tell you that the driver is not dead, only drugged like your two companions in the coach."

He mounted his horse as he spoke, and leading the other, started off, but halting called back:

"I say, pards, as soon as you can free yourselves of those bonds, or rouse your comrades you are at liberty to do so, for there is not a Red Rider in miles, and I am simply one who wanted money so I took yours."

"Good-day!"

One of the miners sprung to his feet with a yell, risking a fire, but the other lay quiet until the daring robber was out of sight.

Then he too arose, and the faces of both were livid with commingled shame and fury.

But their hands were bound tightly behind them, and it was no easy task to free themselves, while all their yelling failed to arouse their drugged comrades and Doc Stevens.

In the mean time Velvet King rode on his way up the trail.

He had gotten the information from Doc Stevens about where the Red-men generally hit the coaches, and he was on the lookout for them.

It was only now and then that they robbed a coach, and they might not be in the trail that day; but he was prepared for them if they were.

He rode to one side and standing on the back of his horse tied his gold up into the branches of a tree.

Then he rode on, and when a mile further was suddenly brought to a halt with:

"Hold! hands up!"

Up went his hands, and out from the cover of rocks came a dozen men.

"How are you, gentlemen?"

"Glad to see you," he said, cheerily.

Those who confronted him were an odd lot.

Their faces were stained a bright red, they wore head-dresses of crimson feathers, and buckskin suits of the same carmine hue, with moccasins, though their heels were armed with spurs.

They were armed each with a rifle slung at his back and a belt of arms, and carried a revolver in hand ready for use.

They seemed nonplused at the man they had halted.

His stylish attire, handsome face, his general appearance so little to be looked for on the border, with his cool salutation, took them aback.

"You are what they call on the Overland the Red men, I believe."

"We are," said one.

"I am delighted to meet you, and suppose you are lying in wait for the stage-coach?"

"Yes; but who are you?"

"I am a gentleman looking for work, a gambler by profession, but, struck with a desire to become one of your band, I was looking for you when you found me."

"Look out for him, Burke, for his cheek shows he's got pards near," said one.

"You are mistaken, and I can prove it."

"I took passage on the coach in hard luck, and had four fellow travelers, miners, going home with some gold with them."

"I took a fancy to their gold, and they took me for a tenderfoot."

"I had some brandy, played the greenhorn, got up with the driver, Doc Stevens, drugged the liquor and let him drink all he wanted."

"Then I passed the flask to those in the coach, and when ready to act, after Doc Stevens keeled over, I dismounted and began work."

"I told the two gentlemen who were not drugged into a stupor that I was the chief of the Red Riders and my men lay in the rocks about them and had them covered."

"I took their weapons, made the two gentlemen get out and lie down, and tied their hands behind them."

"Then I took their gold, saddled and bridled one of the leaders, led the other as you see, and came to look you up, gentlemen, hoping you would give me a chance with you."

The group of Red Riders had gathered about the speaker in utter amazement.

Then the spokesman of the party said:

"And you have this money?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

"Say about ten thousand in dust."

"Where is it?"

"Now let me tell you that I hid it, and if you act square with me, I'll give it to you."

"If you don't, I'll die before you shall even see it."

The men stepped apart, and talked together awhile.

Then the spokesman said:

"You beat any man we ever seen afore; but you looks square, and if you is, we'll be ther same."

"Our chief died of a wound three days ago, and his shoes is yourn if yer wants 'em, for you is one to tie to, or I lies like a parrot."

"Now show up yer gold and we'll do ther squar' thing, 'cause I was next to ther chief,

and commands now, and I'm durned glad ter hev a man o' brains like you ter sarve under."

"I'll tell you what I'll do."

"Let us wait here, in hiding until the stage goes by."

"Then you can see there are but four horses, and get a glimpse as to who is in it."

"But this may be a trick o' yourn ter git ther old hearse by with big treasure in it."

King Velvet laughed, and replied:

"You are not such a fool as you look; but it is no trick, so come, I'll trust you and show you the gold, and if you don't act squarely with me then somebody will turn up their toes as well as myself."

"Have you ever heard of a gambler called King Velvet?"

"I has."

"Me, too."

"Yas, down in ther lower mines he are."

"And he's a dandy, I has heard."

Such were the replies of several to the question of the gambler, who then responded:

Well, gentlemen, I am King Velvet, the Gambler of the Gold Mines, and if you have heard of me, as you seem to have done, you will know that I am no man to be made a fool of."

"Come, let us go after that gold."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE RED RIDERS.

THE man who had said that he was in command of the Red Riders, since the death of their chief a few days before, remained standing in the trail by the side of King Velvet, while the others went back into the timber and soon returned mounted.

The gambler noticed the horse which one man led up to the leader, and saw that he was a splendid animal.

He was a blooded bay, as were all the others, and the trappings and saddle had been painted red.

"Your horse is a good one, and just the right color," said the leader, referring to the animal ridden by the Velvet King.

"Yes, he'll do until I get a better one; but what is your name?"

"My name are Robbins, but ther boys calls me Red Robin."

"I see, and as I like your red outfit, I'll send East and get me some crimson velvet, so as to still keep up my name of King Velvet, for I always wear it."

"You is a dandy, Cap, and I'm yer friend," said Red Robin, in admiration.

They were riding along side by side, and King Velvet drew rein.

"You meant what you said, men?"

"Yas," came the response in chorus.

"I am to be your chief?"

"You is!"

"You bet!"

"Sure!"

"Yas!"

"You are, for a fact!"

"I says so!"

"Me, too!"

Such were the cries that greeted the question.

Then the Velvet King rose in his stirrups, reached his hands over his head and took down the gold from the branch where it was tied and completely hidden by the thick foliage.

The men looked at each other in blank amazement.

"Pard Red Robin, there is your dust, so divide it among you, for I ask only a share with the rest."

The men gathered around Red Robin, and the gold-dust was divided with wonderful alacrity.

"Here is your share, cap'n," said Red Robin, addressing Velvet King, who had remained seated upon his horse.

"Thank you; but now to keep your word as I have mine."

"I'll do it."

"Pards, I names this gent our chief, and interdooces yer ter Cap'n King Velvet o' ther Red Riders o' ther Rockies."

A cheer greeted his words, and Velvet King asked:

"Is there a dissenting voice?"

"Nary one."

"Then I am your chief, and I shall expect you to do your duty by me as I will do mine by you."

"We will, cap'n," was the cry, and then one said:

"Now ter rob ther coach when she comes along."

"No, I did that, and the coach shall go by unmolested," was the stern response, and the Red Riders saw at once that they had one to deal with who meant to be master.

"Let us hide and see it go by, though, for I have a curiosity to see them."

"There's a brook ahead, and they is sure to stop thar ter water ther critters, and we has plenty o' hidin'-places," said Red Robin.

The brook was reached, the horses led back into the timber and the Red Riders hid among the rocks.

They waited for half an hour before the rumble of wheels announced the approach of the coach.

Soon it came in sight, Doc Stevens sat on the box and one of the miners was by his side, and neither looked happy.

They halted at the brook to water the horses and all the men got down for a drink, for they were parched with thirst after the effects of the brandy and drug had worn off.

Doc Stevens had his dipper and all drank eagerly of the cool waters.

"Pards, my head do feel like a beegum," said Doc.

"Waal, ef mine hain't swelled so my hat are four sizes too small," a miner remarked.

"Does yer think that durned velvet-rigged pilgrim hed any help along?" one asked.

"Not a one; he did it all hisself."

"Waal, ef we wasn't tuk in complete, then I are a boss liar."

"He were prime good ter leave us a bag o' ther dust ter git home on."

"I'll sw'ar he were; but don't let us do no more braggin', 'cause them durned Red Riders may yit tackle us and call in ther balance."

They were getting into the coach as they spoke, Doc Stevens and one of the miners having already mounted the box.

Then rung out:

"We'll do it! Hand up, yer devils, or—"

The speaker was one of the Red-men; but he did not complete his sentence, for the hand of King Velvet was upon his throat and he was hurled to the ground with stunning force.

With yells of terror the miners ducked their heads while Doc Stevens lashed up his horses and fled.

The Red Riders were about to fire, when a ringing voice checked them:

"Hold! the man who fires a shot I will kill!"

It was the new chief who spoke, and involuntarily the men obeyed.

They had found their master in an instant.

As the coach dashed on, the four horses in full flight, Velvet King said:

"You, sir, dared to disobey my orders, and shall be punished."

"I said that coach should pass unmolested, and as you disobeyed me, I will take from you your gold and divide it among your comrades."

"If you disregard my orders a second time I will shoot you down as I would a wolf."

"Give me that gold-dust!"

The Red Riders stood aghast.

This was the man they had just made chief.

But they recognized that it was just such a man that they needed for their wild life, and Red Robinspoke up quickly:

"You've got ter mind, Brown."

"Is you goin' ter rob me o' my gold?"

"I'll rob you of your life if you do not hand that gold to Red Robin this instant!"

The pistol of the Velvet King covered the man, and he threw the bag of gold-dust on the rocks.

"Thar it is."

"Thank you, my man, and don't have any hard feelings against me, for if I am chief you all must obey."

"Now, Red Robin, divide the dust, and let us strike for your den, wherever it may be."

"As for you, Brown, I'll soon give you a chance to get more gold," and thus disarming ill-feeling the Velvet King mounted his horse and the Red Riders started for their retreat far back in the mountains.

CHAPTER XL.

A MYSTERIOUS WOMAN.

THE retreat of the Red Riders was in the recesses of the mountains known as the Wild Range.

To reach it one must have a guide, and such was the difficulty of access to it that a dozen men could have, at a number of points that could not be flanked, kept at bay several hundred.

Then, too, there was a hostile tribe of Indians whose village was in the Wild Range, though at a point distant from the rendezvous of the outlaws, and this alone would make a band of Vigilantes or company of soldiers cautious about pursuing the Red Riders into their fastnesses.

The moment that King Velvet reached the retreat he began reforms.

The band numbered a score of men, and they were as wild a lot as were the savages, or the wolves about them.

They lived in rude cabins, spent their time in carousing, card-playing and idleness, going only upon raids when they needed money.

The new chief changed all this, had a sentinel at an advanced post constantly on duty, and drilled the band into discipline.

The cabins were improved, and he arranged for supplies to be kept under a commissary.

The horses had to be well cared for, and in a short while perfect order reigned where all had been anarchy before.

He enlarged the band as he could, and kept several spies constantly on the stage-lines, in one capacity or another, or as travelers, so that only coaches having treasure or passengers with valuable booty should be reported.

He went himself and acquainted himself with

the whole line, and made Red Top his point of attack as best suited for it and also for an escape.

Having gotten fully settled and the reins in his own hands, he sent two men off on a special and secret mission.

These two men journeyed Eastward, and they were well supplied with money and carried with them a letter written in a mysterious cipher and addressed to a person in a distant State.

One pleasant afternoon the one to whom that letter was addressed sat upon the piazza of a cottage overlooking the Hudson River.

It was a woman, or rather a maiden, with a face strangely beautiful, a form exquisitely lovely.

But there was a look in the dark eyes that was dangerous, a something in the face that showed that reason gave way to love in her nature.

She was clad in mourning, as though some one dear to her had just died, and her lips curled as she muttered:

"Has he forgotten his vow?"

"A thousand times have I asked myself that question, but no answer can I get."

"Did he deceive me?"

"Did he really love that girl and marry her with a lie on his lips to me?"

"If not why have I not heard from him since he wrote me that she was dying?"

"By Heaven, if he has deceived me, then will I have his life if I have to beg my way over the whole earth to find him."

"My mother is dead, I have not a tie now but him, and I am left almost penniless, a beggar, as it were."

"My face is my fortune, did I choose to put it up for sale; but I love him, him above all, and him will I have."

She paused and gazed upon a carriage coming up the road.

It drew rein before the cottage gate and two men sprang out.

They were ordinary-looking men, though well-dressed, and they raised their hats awkwardly as they approached.

The woman arose and bowed coldly.

"We are seeking for this lady, miss," and one of the men handed her an envelope that was sealed and addressed.

"I am the one you seek."

"Be seated, please."

"No, thank you, we will drive on to the village and you can send an answer there to us, at the tavern, as to whether we are to wait, or go back without you, for the letter explains all, miss."

She bowed and the men departed.

She had recognized the writing on the envelope, and her face had flushed and paled by turns.

Then she turned and entered the plainly, but neatly-furnished cottage and threw herself into a chair.

Breaking the seal she saw that there were a number of written pages, but it was all in cipher, one she knew well.

Then there were several bank-notes of large denomination in the letter also, and these she thrust into her bosom for safe-keeping.

Then she read the letter slowly and to the end.

Her face was a study the while, for the color came and went, the features writhed at times, and the eyes flashed and softened.

"I will go—of course I will go, for what tie holds me here where he bids me come?"

"His letter is a strange one, and I am to do strange things, it seems; but I trust all in him and shall obey and go."

So saying she arose and sat down to her desk and wrote a note.

The names of the two men were upon the envelope and she addressed the note to one of them.

It was but a few lines and read:

"It will take me a week to close up my affairs, and then I will be ready to return with you."

The letter was sent to the tavern in the village by the son of the woman who was her only servant.

Then she began work. She began to pack up what she wished to carry and to store away what remained.

The woman and her son were to remain and take charge of the house.

In what she did the lady seemed to be governed by the letter, for often she referred to it.

At length she was ready to go, sooner than she had thought, and the baggage she carried with her was not much.

She had prepared for a long and hard journey, a journey over hill, valley, mountain and prairie, toward the land of the setting sun.

Her escorts were respectful, and furnished her with all comforts to be procured.

She was a superb horsewoman, so went most of the way in the saddle.

At length when far out in the West the two escorts held a conversation together and came to some decision.

They consulted with their fair charge, and when, the next night, there was an attack on the train by Indians, the three escaped together.

And this was the beautiful woman whom Buffalo Bill had saved from the red-skins, and who had so mysteriously disappeared from the fort.

CHAPTER XLI.

FLYING FALSE COLORS.

"YER comes in ther wrong colors ter be a friend o' this outfit."

Such was the reply of the man who had fired at Buffalo Bill as he approached the retreat of the Red-men.

The scout had felt that the man had shot at him, and missed, so he had held his hands above his head and stated that he was no foe.

"I am in the army uniform, yes; but I escaped from the fort to save my life, and came to join the Red-men."

"Ah! who is yer?"

"I'm Sergeant Dave Dawson, of the cavalry, or rather was before I deserted."

"I has seen notices stuck up thet yer hed shot a comrade and then deserted, and was ter be shot; but you had made yer escape?"

"Yes, I did."

"I seen a notice stuck up at ther Cross Trails."

"Yer name is Dave Dawson?"

"Yes."

"That's ther name was posted; but who sent yer here?"

"No one, only the troopers were after me and I hid in the mountains until I could come here."

"Who did yer come here ter see?"

"The Red Riders."

"To j'ine 'em?"

"Yes."

The man stood on the other side of a bowlder, his head and shoulders only showing.

On the top of the bowlder lay his rifle, cocked and pointed toward Buffalo Bill, who sat upon his horse some twenty feet away.

"You is a bad man, from what yer says o' yerself, for yer shooted a pard, deserted, and when captered has made yer escape ter keep from being shot."

"Now we is honest men and don't encourage no wickedness," said the sentinel with an attempt at wit.

"So I have heard; but I thought you'd like to have one black sheep in the fold."

"Waal, as to that this hain't no sheepfold, but rather a wolf-but; but, howsomever as yer nas come here I has ter take yer in to ther chief."

"But how on 'arth did yer find us?"

"I had heard that the Red Riders had their retreat in the Wild Range, and I came on here until I struck the trail of a horse and followed it."

"I see; it was ther cap'n; but you is sart'in yer is alone?"

"Oh, yes, who could be with me?"

"Waal, I has ter be on ther safe side, so I'll jist call fer help, and not leave my post o' duty."

As he spoke he fired his revolver in the air three times, slowly, evidently a signal.

In five minutes there was heard the clatter of hoofs and two horsemen appeared in sight.

Like the sentinel they were dressed in red, and their faces were painted the same hue.

They rode blood-red bay horses, and were thoroughly armed.

As they came up they drew rein, surveying the supposed deserter closely.

"Pards, this gent are a deserter from ther fort."

"Yer remembers we seen a notice stuck up at ther Cross Trails offering a reward for an escaped sergeant, Dave Dawson?"

"Yes; and is you ther man?" asked one.

"Yes."

"How did yer git here?"

"I explained to your companion, and if you will take me before your chief I will convince him that I am all right."

"We'll do it, and not take yer blindfolded, nuther, for if you don't pan out squar', yer'll never git back."

With this uncomfortable assurance the two men rode up to the pretended deserter and disarmed him.

Then, with one in the rear and the other leading the way, they rode on toward the retreat.

A prettier spot could not have been well selected, for the camp was in a small glen, with mountains towering above, a fall dashing down over a lofty cliff, and the clearest of crystal streams running down the valley.

There were meadowlands near, covered with a drove of horses, and the cabins scattered about had near them fenced-in patches where the outlaws had their gardens full of vegetables.

There were but two passes down into or from the valley or glen, and the outlaws could never be caught napping, for a sentinel was at either one, and if forced to retreat they could readily escape one way or the other and by a trail that defied pursuit.

The cabin of the chief was really a comfortable structure, built like the old-time Southern cabin, two rooms on either side, with an open space between, and surrounded by a shed which was by courtesy called the piazza.

Several hammocks were swung under this

shed, saddles, bridles and weapons hung on the wall, and two large dogs lay out in front of the cabin, giving it a home-like appearance that seemed strange for that wild land.

There was an appearance about the little settlement of comfort, and also of discipline, and one dropping in upon the picturesque scene would never have suspected that he was in the camp of outlaws, the cruel and desperate Red Riders of the Rocky Mountains.

In one of the hammocks, as the two outlaws approached with Buffalo Bill, reclined a feminine form, a book in her hand.

At a table sat a man, the chief. The table was littered with gold, and the chief was dividing it into separate parts, all equal save two.

One of these two was for the common treasury of the band, the other the chief's share, and the score or more smaller piles were for the men.

The one who was dividing the spoils was the man who had so daringly captured the gold when disguised as a woman in black.

The man was also the one who had become chief of the Red Riders through his bold determination to win that position.

It was King Velvet, and he had become the idol of his men.

He was dressed in a suit of red velvet, a broad-brimmed sombrero of the same hue hung on the back of his chair, and a crimson, close-fitting mask was upon the table by his side.

His hair was long, waving, falling upon his shoulders, and his handsome face was beardless, giving him a very youthful appearance.

Stylish boots came up above his knees and were armed with gold spurs, a sash of gold thread woven by some fair hand, encircled his waist, half-concealing the belt that held his arms.

He wore a loose-fitting silk shirt of snow-white, and the collar was encircled by a scarf of red silk in which was a pin representing a hand of coral holding four aces.

Around his hat was a chain of five-dollar gold-pieces, and altogether King Velvet, chief of the Red Riders, was a very striking and remarkable-looking personage.

He glanced up as he beheld the two men of his band approaching with a prisoner, and as they halted before his cabin he arose and advanced to meet them, his jingling spurs and coins making pleasing music with every step.

"Well, men, who have you there?" he said in a rich, decided voice.

"We'll let him do his own talkin', cap'n, for Sloan give him to us ter fetch ter you," said one of the men.

"Well, sir, how is it a man in your uniform finds himself in the camp of the Red Riders?" sternly asked King Velvet, gazing with admiration upon the superb form and handsome face of the pretended deserter.

Like a Centaur did Buffalo Bill sit his horse, and he certainly presented a fine appearance, in spite of his travel-stained uniform.

"I was so unfortunate, sir, as to shoot a comrade over a game of cards, and believing I had killed him I deserted, was captured and sentenced to death.

"I made my escape and after hiding in the mountains for some days sought your camp, to see if I might cast my lot with yours."

The words were spoken sadly, but with seeming frankness, and Velvet King asked:

"What is your name, sir?"

"Dave Dawson, late sergeant of the Third Cavalry."

"Ah, yes, I saw the name posted on the Overland Trail with an offer of a thousand dollars reward for your body dead or alive from the commandant of the fort."

"Yes, sir, Captain Carrol."

"Well, I see how a thousand dollars can be made; but we are not so badly off for money, business being good with us just now, so I will not deliver you up."

"Thank you, sir."

"Now tell me how you found your way here?"

"I had heard the Red Riders had a retreat in the Wild Range, so made my way here, struck a fresh trail yesterday and followed it until your sentinel fired on me."

"And missed you?"

"Yes, sir; by an inch."

"That man must practice more; but I am glad, for your sake, he missed you."

"Now tell me what do you wish to do?"

"Join your band, for I am a hunted man, the shadow of death hanging upon me."

"Well, I want good men, and if you are not one your looks belie you."

"I will tell you that to become a Red-man you have to take an oath that appalls most men, and I have never known it to be broken since I originated it, and woe be unto the man who does."

"I lost my lieutenant to-day by death, he having been thrown by his horse, and if you are the man I take you for you can soon step into his shoes."

"Now go and take Red Robin's cabin and rig yourself out in our carmine uniform."

"Your horse is a good one, but will not do for work, as we ride only blood-bays."

"This evening at sunset one will come to administer the oath to you, so be prepared."

"Now tell me what news from the fort you can give me."

"None, sir; for you know I was in the guard-house, and since my escape was hiding in the woods."

"Ah, yes; now go to your quarters with these men who will look after your comfort."

The pretended deserter rode away with his two guards to the small cabin of Red Robin, who had been buried an hour before, thus leaving his little home deserted.

As he departed King Velvet resumed the counting of his gold, while the woman in the hammock said in a low tone:

"That man has come here to his doom."

CHAPTER XLII.

THE PARSON'S DAUGHTER.

I HOPE that my good reader has not forgotten Mount Vista, in far-away New Hampshire, the home of the Marsdens?

It was the home from which Marmaduke Marsden went forth a disowned son, and which the one he had believed his younger brother had become the possessor of, with all the wealth of old Mabrey Marsden.

People wondered when Duke Marsden went away from the home which it was believed he was the heir to, as the eldest son.

The rumor got out in some way that on account of his wild life his father had disinherited him, and great was the regret felt, for Duke Marsden, not Mabrey, was the favorite with all who knew the two brothers.

But certain it was that Duke Marsden had left the home the night following his father's burial, but whither gone no one knew, and not a word came back to Mount Vista as to what had become of him.

After a short season of mourning Mabrey Marsden launched out in great style.

The old home had to be changed to suit him, there was new furniture needed, and the result was that there was a great deal of money put upon the mansion, its grounds and outbuildings, and ere the old master had been six months in his grave the wife was in half-mourning and the son and heir the gayest of the gay.

In the village people looked upon this change with a frown.

There seemed to be an idea gaining ground that Duke Marsden had left through some mysterious reason unknown, and it appeared strange that his name was never mentioned by his brother or mother, as the neighbors supposed them to be, for the letter left by old Mr. Marsden had remained as a dead secret.

On the parsonage at Phantom Falls a shadow had fallen with the departure of Duke Marsden.

"Strange that he came not near us, my child, to say farewell," said the Reverend John Maxwell, referring to the sudden departure of Duke Marsden, and addressing his daughter Kate, who sat in the room with him one pleasant afternoon.

"Yes, father, it is strange," and Kate blushed, and then looked sad.

She remembered a certain letter she had received from Duke Marsden the day of his departure, and from that day there had been a secret between the two.

"Mabrey Marsden was here to-day, Kate, to see me," ventured the old clergyman.

"Yes, father."

"He is coming again to-morrow to see you, my child, and I need not tell you that, though I would have preferred his brother, wild as he was, I yet felt that I had no right to refuse his request to pay his addresses to you."

Kate Maxwell made no reply, but her face became very pale.

"You know, my child, that this village pays me next to nothing, and though it was all right as long as I had an income from my bank stock, it now, since the failure of the bank, leaves us barely food."

"My heart-trouble, you know, may carry me off at any moment, and you would be left alone and poor."

"True, you have a fine education, you can paint, teach music and make a living, but I wish to see you in a position worthy of your beauty and accomplishments, and for this reason I ask you to accept the hand of Mr. Mabrey Marsden."

"There, there, my child, don't worry, for your old father cannot always be with you," and kissing her the old parson hastened from the room.

Kate Maxwell did not give way to tears.

She checked them the moment her father left the library and springing to her feet went to her own room.

Then she took from a desk a letter and read it in a low tone, while her face changed with the emotions that swept over her.

That letter said:

"I love you with all the power of my being, and though Mabrey Marsden has hinted that you were engaged to him, I have your word for it that you are not."

"Circumstances that overwhelm me drive me from you, but ere I go I make this confession of

my love, and from what has passed between us alone, I will hope to one day claim you as my wife."

"I am under a cloud, and I go forth in the world almost penniless."

"But I go to carve out my own fortune in my own way."

"I have much to repent of in my past wild life—it ends to-day."

"Not again shall I yield to dissipation, not again will I be a gambler."

"By honest labor only will I seek a fortune that I may some day—perhaps not in years, though—return and offer to you."

"What drives me away I cannot now explain; but it is from no dishonor of mine, I pledge you."

"I go, and, if you love me, you will trust me and wait, though no word from me will reach you."

"I shall live in hope, though I get no word from you."

"Heaven forgive me the past and help me in the future!"

"Again I say I will hope. MARMADUKE."

Such was the letter that Kate Maxwell read, and it looked as though it had been coned over many times.

There was a set look on her lovely face as she replaced it in her desk and went down-stairs once more.

The next morning she was seated in the library alone, her father having gone down into the village to visit a sick parishioner.

She looked very beautiful in her white dress, relieved by red ribbons, and she sat at her easel putting the finishing touches upon a portrait she had been painting with no unskilled hand.

A photograph tacked on the upright of the easel showed that she had made a perfect likeness of the subject.

Presently a horseman rode up, dismounted, threw his rein over the hitching-post and ascended the piazza.

She arose and met him, saying quietly:

"Walk in, Mr. Marsden, but father is absent."

"I saw your father yesterday, and it is you whom I have come to see to-day, Kate."

"Did not Doctor Maxwell speak to you for me?" responded Mabrey Marsden, upon whose face there was a look that plainly showed that he was confident of success.

"Yes, Mr. Marsden, my father told me that you had honored me by asking of him my hand in marriage, and that he had given his consent."

"So I asked him, Kate, and he gave you to me," and the confident lover stepped forward.

She drew herself up and said calmly:

"Mr. Marsden, my father's consent was given of course in the belief that I would not refuse the offer you make me."

"But my hand can only go with my heart, and frankly I tell you that I love another."

She heard the smothered oath that came from between his teeth, and she saw his flushed face pale, while an angry light came into his eyes at his fallen pride.

"You refuse my offer, Miss Maxwell?" he said, insolently.

"I do, sir, though I still hope that we will be friends, as in the past."

"I ask love, not friendship, Miss Maxwell; but pray tell me who it is that has won your love from me?"

"My love, sir, you never possessed, for the one I feel myself pledged to, as I owe my life to him and far more, is the original of this portrait."

As she spoke she turned the easel around, displaying the splendid face of Marmaduke Marsden.

"Curses! that man!"

"You are engaged to him?"

"I feel myself pledged to him, yes."

"You shall never marry him, for he is an outcast, a beggar, a gambler."

"I say you shall never be his wife, and you will rue the day, Kate Maxwell, when you cast my love aside—mark my words."

"Mr. Marsden, your anger and fallen pride bring out your true character, sir, and I must ask you to leave this house."

He gazed at her an instant and then said, hoarsely:

"You have heard what I said, so remember."

With this he wheeled as though to depart, turned quickly, strode across the room, and seizing the portrait dashed it to the floor ere Kate could understand his motive and crushed it beneath his heels.

"Mabrey Marsden, beneath my own roof I must say that you are not a gentleman, and never shall you cross my threshold again."

"Go!"

It was the parson who spoke, and he stood in the doorway his face pale with anger.

The insulter glanced at him as though to spring upon him for his words, but he saw something in that face which checked his impulse, and with a muttered curse he strode from the room and the house, threw himself into his saddle and dashed off like the wind toward Mount Vista.

And the old parson stood like a statue for a moment, then clasped his hands over his heart and fell his length upon the floor, while the cry rang out from Kate's lips:

"My God, have mercy! that man has killed him!"

CHAPTER XLIII.

KATE MAXWELL.

WHEN Mabrey Marsden dashed up to Mount Vista, his beautiful, haughty mother sat upon the piazza in an easy-chair, engaged in reading a novel.

Her white robe, trimmed with black was most becoming, and few who beheld her could have been made to believe that she was the mother of the tall man who threw himself from his horse and approached her.

There was not a silver thread in her dark hair, no "crows' feet" had gathered about the eyes, and her form was perfect, though she had gone across the threshold of two-score several years before.

She saw that her son was in no good humor, and she glanced up as he threw himself into a chair near her and asked, in her low, sweet voice:

"What frets you, my son?"

"Enough to make me feel like murder," he answered fiercely.

"What, so bad as that?" and the woman's voice was unmoved.

"Yes."

"Can you not tell me what the matter is?"

"Oh, yes, I can tell, and you will laugh."

"Let me hear then?"

"The master of Mount Vista, the millionaire, has been discarded for a beggar and an outcast."

"Ah! you went to offer your heart and hand to Miss Maxwell, I believe?"

"I did."

"With indifferent result, I should take it?"

"She trampled upon the one and refused the other."

"Irrevocably?"

"Yes."

The woman broke forth in a hearty, silvery laugh.

"It seems to please you."

"It does."

"I see nothing amusing in it, and your laugh grates harshly upon my ears."

"Pardon me, Mabrey; but it is amusing to me to have my son, the master of an immense fortune, refused by a beggarly parson's daughter."

"Gave she no reason?"

"Yes; reason enough."

"Am I to be admitted into your confidence?"

"Oh, yes; for it will be no secret, I suppose, as she will doubtless rush around to papa's parsoners and tell of the thrilling scene."

"It was thrilling then?"

"Quite so, for when I asked her to be my wife she coolly said she was pledged to another, one whom she loved."

"I asked who this fortunate individual was, and she showed me a portrait which she had just completed of—who do you think?"

"Marmaduke, of course."

"Yes; your woman's wit is keen, mother."

"I guessed it long ago."

"I could not believe it to be so."

"What did you say?"

"I didn't say so much—I acted."

"Indeed?"

"I dashed the portrait to the floor and trampled upon it."

"Mabrey Marsden, you forgot yourself, your manhood, and what was due to a lady's presence," severely said the mother.

"Don't lecture me, for I was driven to madness and lost control."

"And what did she say?"

"Not a word."

"What did she do?"

"Drew herself up haughtily and smiled—my God! what a smile it was too."

"And you left?"

"Just then old Maxwell came in, and he told me that I was no gentleman and ordered me from his house."

"He did right."

"You uphold him?"

"It would be a poor creature that would not protect his daughter."

"I was tempted to strike him, but he gave me a look I shall never forget, and I left the house and came home."

"Well, my son, you have made a fool of yourself."

"I expect sarcasm from you, mother."

"No; expect truth, for you get it."

"I regret this losing of your temper, and trampling upon the portrait, for no apology can smooth that over."

"Do you think for an instant I would apologize?"

"To a young girl, and a clergyman, who is three-score years of age, yes."

"It is their due, and more, as a gentleman, you owe it to yourself."

"You must not attempt to override public opinion too far, and this act of yours to-day will stamp you so that thinking people will not forget it."

"People have good memories for evil-doers, so you can do but one thing."

"And that is?"

"Sit down and write to Doctor Maxwell at once, telling him that you did wrong, but in

your loss of his daughter's love, you were carried beyond all restraint.

"Hint that your brother had grievously injured you in the past, and when you knew that it was he who was your successful rival, your temper got the best of you and carried you beyond all bounds."

"This will set you aright there, and then we will run up to the city and I will select for you a wife you cannot help but love."

"No, thank you; at least not just yet, for I have not given up the hope of winning Kate Maxwell yet."

"Go in and write the letter," the mother said, severely, and then a strange smile hovered over her face.

The young man entered the library, and seating himself at his desk, at last wrote a note that suited him, after several trials.

He had just written the name on the envelope when his mother entered the room, and placing her long, slender finger on the address said impressively:

"You have just written the name of a dead man, Mabrey."

"My God! What do you mean?"

"A gentleman just stopped at the door to say that Doctor Maxwell had dropped dead in his library an hour ago with heart disease, and in the presence of his daughter."

"He has long been a sufferer, you know, and your scene with him brought the fatal end."

The man dropped his head in his hands. He was bit hard and his mother's cold reproach had stung him deeper still.

Then he arose and paced the room.

"Mother, for my sake, go to her, and bear the note I have just written."

"I will go," and half an hour after Mrs. Marsden drove away in the family carriage for the village of Phantom Falls.

Within two hours she was back again.

Mabrey Marsden met her at the door and said eagerly:

"Well?"

"It is true—he is dead."

"Yes, and Kate?"

"Refused to see me."

"And my letter?"

"Returned it to me unread."

"You are sure she knew who you were?"

"Oh, yes, for the servant took my name to her."

"And were others there?"

"Yes."

"Did they see her?"

"Yes."

He snatched the note rudely from his mother's hand, and then his eyes fell upon some writing above the address.

He read, in a bold feminine hand, written on the envelope over the name:

"Too late!"

KATE MAXWELL."

Mabrey Marsden ground his teeth together and walked off to his room, and he remained there until after the poor clergyman was buried.

Then he asked his mother as to what the daughter would do.

"She left by the coach for the city immediately after the funeral, and she gave no address to any one, I have heard."

"I will find her," was the determined response of Marsden, uttered in a low tone.

But his mother heard the words and smiled.

CHAPTER XLIV.

FOR LOVE, OR FOR GOLD.

"FATE is against me, Stella, for I am heir to nothing."

The remark was made by a young man, and the one he addressed was a maiden scarcely over nineteen.

The speaker had ridden up to the gate of a small cottage, dismounted from his horse, and was met by the fair young mistress of the house with a bright and cheery smile.

Her smile faded at his words, and she said, in a low, anxious voice:

"What do your words mean, Braxton?"

"I will tell you just what they mean, Stella, and I will be glad if it pains you as it did me to know that we cannot be united as I had hoped."

"What is your misfortune, Braxton, is mine, and your sorrows are mine," she answered, earnestly.

They were a striking-looking couple, those two.

The man with a look slightly effeminate, unless to a close observer of face and form.

To such the face would have been full of manhood, though the features might be marred by a certain look of reckless dissipation.

The young man had been well born, and to riches.

An only child, he had been spoiled by his parents and had become a wild, reckless fellow before he entered college.

There he had lived more like a prince than an American youth, indulged by his parents in every whim.

He had a suite of rooms, kept his valet, his horse and buggy, and lived on the fat of the land.

He was the best shot and fencer in the college, could put on the gloves with a prize-fighter, and it was said that he was up in all sports and behind in his studies.

But for all that, he graduated at the head of his class.

At college he had met a young man who was poor, but between the two a warm friendship had sprung up.

This friend had a sister who was at a neighboring school, and the young aristocrat first fell in love with her picture, then with her when they met, and the affection was mutual, and they became engaged.

The maiden was very beautiful, very lovable, but she was one to whom love was her creed, her all.

It was a year after the graduation of the maiden, that they met at the time when he made the remark that opens this chapter.

Since leaving college the young heir to great wealth, as was believed, had not mended his ways, but he intended to do so when he was married.

But when he told his parents that he intended soon to marry, he was shocked to learn that his father's best speculations had turned out badly and that they were living on borrowed money.

"My boy, old Lennox loaned me a large sum to-day, and he said he wished you would fall in love with his daughter, for she really loved you."

"I told him you were half in love with her, and if you marry her you can save me, save your mother, myself and yourself from beggary."

"If you refuse, then we are utterly ruined."

"I will marry her," was the frank response, and the young prodigal sought the lady in question, offered himself, and was accepted, the marriage to take place at an early date.

Then he sought the woman whom he really loved, and told her all.

"Now, don't weep, tear your hair and scold, Stella, for this is but a putting-off of our marriage."

"I marry the girl to save my parents from beggary, and because my wild extravagances have brought ruin upon them."

"In a short while, when I can handle her large fortune and set my father on his feet, I shall live such a life she will be glad to get rid of me."

"Then I will come and make you my wife."

"You swear this, Braxton?" she asked earnestly, her love for him outweighing all other considerations.

"Yes, I swear it."

"Within what time?"

"I will set no regular time, Stella, but as soon as I can save my father, then I will see to it that my wife will be glad to separate from me."

Such was the heinous contract between the two, each trying to condone the act on account of their love for one another.

And so this strange marriage took place, the wife being a frail, beautiful, confiding girl who idolized the man who thus deceived her into marrying him.

And soon after the wedding the bride's father urged that they should go West, Braxton to take charge of a mine he owned there and which it was expected would pay largely.

They went, and soon after their arrival the crash came, and Mr. Lennox failed.

It was found out that he, too, was involved, though he had not known it, and so both families lost all.

In his fury the young husband left his wife, a bride of less than a year, and returned East.

A stormy interview followed with his father-in-law, the son interfered and in his fury Braxton shot him dead.

Then the guilty man fled back to the West.

He was almost penniless, but he knew that his wife had several thousands in money.

He returned to her, told her nothing of what had occurred, and got her to go further into the wilds of the frontier with him.

Thus he roamed about for months, a fugitive from justice and hiding from his wife the dread secret that her brother had fallen by his hand.

He became a gambler, and met with phenomenal success.

Then their child was born in a mining-camp, a tiny girl, and it seemed from that day the gambler's luck left him.

He lost all he had won, until at last, in sheer despair at his ill-luck, he drove his wife and child from his cabin home one night, out into a gathering storm.

That night was the commencement of winter, for the dawn came with a heavy snow upon the earth.

The man supposed his wife and child to have fled to some of the neighboring cabins, so did not search for her.

But days passed, and when he heard nothing of them and ugly rumors began to float around, he took flight one night for other scenes, confident that those he had driven from his door lay beneath the snow and would be found in the spring, when it would be the worst for him.

From that day the cruel man became an outcast, a fugitive, and as wicked at heart as the worst desperado upon the frontier.

He knocked about the border from New Mex-

ice to California and then into the mining-country, and he was both admired and dreaded.

He was striving to build up a fortune that he might claim the one woman he had loved as his wife.

With ample riches and Stella he would seek a foreign land and dwell without fear that he would end his life on the gallows for murder.

That man was he whom the old miner who had sought him out that night in Shanty Paradise at the Golden Luck Saloon, had called Braxton Prince.

To those in that mining-camp he was known as King Velvet, the Gambler.

The woman who had received the letter in cipher from him was Stella, who, knowing his guilt, had gladly gone to the far frontier at his call.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE RED RIDER'S BRIDE.

WHEN King Velvet became Chief of the Red Riders, it was with one purpose in view, and that was to quickly accumulate riches.

He had recognized his father-in-law in the man who had sought him at Shanty Paradise, and by a strange impulse of nobility had not killed him, but received his fire.

He had heard that Mr. Lennox, after the death of his wife, had come West, and that an old mine had panned out a fortune to him.

That mine, that fortune he sought, when he knew that the owner was dead, killed by a shot from Bad Bill that night in the Golden Luck Saloon.

The one who had befriended the old miner that night must know all about the mine, and that one he sought to find.

He had tracked him well, and believing that he had at last all in his grasp as he wished, he had struck a fatal blow.

As Chief of the Red Riders he was a terror on the frontier, and, as gold began to fill his coffers, he decided to send East for the woman he loved.

With murder charged against him, he dared not go himself, and he did not care to do so, for his old parents had died long before with a broken heart.

So it was that he sent the two men, who executed their mission well, up to the night of the Indian attack upon the train.

Then they had become separated from their beautiful charge, and finding that she had been pursued by a band of Indians, they had dogged their trail.

The result was that they made the discovery that Mrs. Braxton, as King Velvet had bidden her call herself in his letter to her, had been rescued by Buffalo Bill and taken to the fort.

Then the two messengers sped away with all speed for the retreat of the Red Riders, and made their report to King Velvet.

They saw that their chief was deeply moved. He certainly loved his wife, as they believed her to be.

Then he sent a courier after one who was his spy, traveling over the Overland, or making his stay at the different stations in various disguises, to report when rich freights went through, or passengers with fat purses.

This man was sent to the fort, with bogus dispatches forged for him, and communicated with "Mrs. Braxton," as has been seen.

The next day the mysterious lady disappeared, leaving no trace behind her.

But the bogus "courier" had met her at a point agreed upon and had led her to a rendezvous appointed with his chief, and there these two, the man and the woman, again met after the strange adventures of the one, the long waiting of the other.

"And you sent for me to make me your wife, Braxton?" asked the woman, in a low, earnest tone.

"Yes."

"But where is there a clergyman in this wild land, away from the fort?" she queried.

"Come with me and I will find one."

They rode for hours through the mountains, until at last they came to a well-defined trail.

"This is the Overland Trail, and I meet my men near here."

"Your men?"

"Yes, for Marsden here is not my only friend."

"There are the two who came with me."

"Yes, and others besides."

"Who are you, Braxton, and what are you doing, for I know nothing about you of late?"

"I am one who loves you, Stella, and at last can see the realization of my dreams in making you my wife."

"I have been a football of fate, knocked about cruelly, nearly killed, and at times, oh! so poor!"

"I gambled and made money, but luck deserted me, and ill-luck dogged my trail."

"The man whose daughter I married, sought me out and sent a bullet so near my heart that it was a year before I was myself again."

"You killed his son."

"Did you kill him, Braxton—"

"You must call me King Velvet here, Stella, for I am known as King Velvet; but no, I did not kill him, though another did and he was buried

on the border; but he had struck it rich, I learned, in some mine, and I of course am the heir."

"You wrote me that your wife died some time ago?"

"Yes, when I was in the mines they perished one night in a snowstorm."

"They?"

"Yes, for I had a child, a baby daughter, and they perished together."

"It is better so, for me, as I could not have been your wife else, and I would have hated her child."

"Ah! here are my men, and I will tell you that I wrote a note to a settlement where there is a clergyman, telling him to come to another station on a certain stage, when he would hear of something to his advantage."

"He will be along on the next coach over the Overland, and he it is who will unite us and my men will be witnesses."

"Your men?"

"Yes."

"You did not tell me what they did?"

"Hunt for gold."

"Oh! they are miners?"

"Well, not exactly, Stella; but we are tax-collectors for the Rocky Mountains, in other words we are seeking our fortunes, and I will soon be rich enough to go with you to another land and lead a different life, for that is my sole aim, and if I can get hold of all of old Lennox' fortune, it will make us immensely rich."

"You do not think the worst of me, do you, because I am a road-agent of the Rocky Mountains?"

"Braxton—"

"King, remember."

"Ah, yes; King, I loved you from the moment I saw you, and ever since my love has increased in spite of all your—may I say—crimes."

"What you are to-day I care not, for I love you; but your life is one of danger, and I hope soon we can leave here and go far away to dwell in peace at least."

"And happiness?"

"Yes; I will be happy with you anywhere, King, and under all circumstances."

"But these are your men—how weird, how strange they seem."

Ned Marsden, who had been acting as guide, had led the way into a glen, and there, mounted and drawn up in line, were the Red Riders, a score in number, and they doffed their red sombreros as their chief and Stella rode down the line.

"Most time for the coach, Red Robin?" asked King Velvet.

"Yes, sir; in half an hour she'll be along; but we were a-fearin' yer wouldn't reach here in time."

"Oh, yes; but let me present the lady who is to be your fair queen—the Lady of the Red Riders."

The men all bowed, and Stella turned her glorious eyes seemingly upon the face of each man and said:

"I am very glad to meet you all, and I know we will be friends."

Just then the rumble of wheels was heard, and the Red Riders prepared for action.

CHAPTER XLVI.

PARSON PETE.

THE coach soon rolled into view, a heavily-bearded driver upon the box, and his four horses, for his run was not a rough one to require six, on a brisk trot.

He was not expecting to be met by road-agents, and when the summons came:

"Halt that coach, or you die!" he was taken utterly by surprise.

But he was not too much surprised not to halt.

His wheelers were drawn back with a lurch, his right foot pressed upon the heavy brake, and the coach came to a standstill.

The driver was too well posted in border life to have thought of flight for an instant.

Then King Velvet rode boldly out into view, alone, and with his face concealed by a red mask.

He was a striking-looking person, a superb horseman, and alarmed though the passengers were, they could not but admire him.

"Waal, you are a dandy and no mistake, and I guesses you is the Grand High Muck-amuck o' ther Red-men," said the driver.

"I am Chief of the Red Riders, but will not detain you long."

"How many passengers have you?"

"Six and a kid, which I suppose counts for one."

"There is a clergyman along?"

"A clergy—who?"

"A preacher."

"Lord deliver us, thar is; but he's got no tin."

"It is Parson Peter, I believe?"

"That's his handle for sart'in."

"That is the man I want," and riding up to the stage door the Red Rider said:

"Parson Peter, I want you, so come out of that coach."

"I'm dead, I know I am," groaned a voice within.

"No, you are very much alive, I should say; but come out!"

The parson did not obey, and a revolver was shoved into his face.

"Will you come?"

"Verily I will," and the parson, a tall, lank specimen of humanity, clothed in black, stepped out of the coach with a look of fear upon his face.

"Have you any baggage?"

"Only a hand-bag."

"Bring it along—there now, driver, you can go on your way."

"Does yer intend ter keep that Bible critter?"

"Yes."

"Would you harm him?"

"Go on, unless you wish to get into trouble."

"I'll do it—git!"

The horses moved on and the stage rolled out of sight.

Then King Velvet turned to the preacher, who looked as though he thought his moments were numbered.

"You are Parson Pete, of Pinewood Settlement?"

"Yes; I am Peter Russell, but the boys call me Parson Peter."

"Well, sir, do not be alarmed, for I mean you no harm, and it was I who sent to you to come East by this stage, for I needed your services."

"Some one to plant, of course?"

"No; I have no burials on hand just now."

"You are a road-agent?"

"So-called."

"What can you want with me?"

"It is not strange that a saint should wish to know what business a sinner has with him; but the truth is, Parson Peter, I wish to get married!"

"Get married?"

And the parson looked as amazed as though the robber-chief had spoken of cutting his throat.

"Yes; I have a lady present with me whom I am anxious to make my wife."

"And she?"

"Will marry me."

"It must be with her own free will and consent."

"Of course."

"Does she know you as you are?"

"Yes."

"I will not perform the ceremony until I ask her if she is willing, and more, she must hear from my lips that you are the chief of the most infamous and cruel band of road-agents that ever cursed the country with their presence."

"My dear parson, you are a brave man to speak as you do, when I could readily force you to perform the ceremony."

"My dear sir, let us understand each other."

"I am but a sinner at best, but I have chosen a field I am sure I can do good in."

"I am an ordained clergyman, and so I would be able to unite you with all legality, and will do so if the lady understands wholly what she is doing; but as for forcing me to do that which my conscience would condemn, you have not the power to do so."

"I have but one life, and there is but one death, and I would meet my end without a regret if it had to come."

"Now you know me, sir, and that, if the lady is not wholly willing to become your wife, you cannot force me to marry you to her."

King Velvet laughed lightly and said:

"Parson Pete, I admire your pluck."

"Here is my hand as your friend, if you will take it, and I will give you a thousand dollars for use in your work on the border."

"Come and see the lady, and ask her any questions you wish."

He led the way back into the timber, and Stella rode forward to meet them.

"Stella, this is the Reverend Mr. Russell, and he is the clergyman who is to unite us, when he asks you certain questions he considers his duty to know."

The woman bowed, and the parson, struck with her wondrous beauty, held out his hand and said:

"I am glad to meet you, yet sorry to see you on this wild frontier."

"Did you come of your own will?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Do you know the one whom you are going to marry just as he is?"

"I do."

"You know that he is leading a lawless life?"

"I know it."

"And yet you are willing to bind your life to an outlaw?"

"I am."

"May I ask your motive for this very remarkable procedure upon your part?"

"I love him, and I hope to redeem him."

"Ah! I need ask no more, for there is no reason I should."

"Sir Chief, I will unite you to this lady, and may she accomplish the good aim she has in view."

"Thank you, sir," Stella said with her sweetest smile, while King Velvet remarked:

"We are ready, sir, and this person, Mr. Marsden, will be a witness."

"In half an hour the westward coach will come along and you can halt it and return to your home by it."

The parson bowed and the Red Riders gathered about the group.

Taking the hand of Stella, King Velvet stood before the parson, Ned Marsden standing near to give the bride away.

Then in a solemn voice, there beneath the shadow of the mountains, Parson Pete repeated the ceremony that made the beautiful maiden the wife of King Velvet, the chief of the Red Riders of the Rockies, while the group of outlaws in their fantastic scarlet dresses and painted faces stood about in silent observation of the scene, their heads uncovered and as solemn-looking as though they were gazing down into an open grave.

The responses were repeated distinctly and firmly, and Parson Pete pronounced the amen with a gusto.

"I thank you, Parson Pete, and trust you will accept this as a souvenir of my regard," and taking from the hand of Ned Marsden a buckskin bag of gold he handed it to the preacher, who expressed his thanks most warmly.

"Now, sir, I will see that you catch the coach all right," and King Velvet led the way down to the trail.

The coach soon came along, and stepping out into the trail, Parson Pete halted it, mounted the box with the driver and was gone.

Ten minutes after King Velvet and his men started for their retreat, the outlaw's wife riding by his side.

"That was the coach I notified you of, as having a snug sum of gold to carry through, chief," said Ned Marsden.

"I knew it, but this is my wedding-day, and so the gold was left unmolested," was the reply, and Stella's smile rewarded the outlaw chief for his forbearance.

And this woman, the wife of King Velvet, was the one whose keen eyes had seen through Buffalo Bill's disguise and recognized him when he came to the retreat of the Red Riders pretending to be Dave Dawson, the deserter.

She realized why he had come, she saw Buffalo Bill beneath the garb he wore, and knew that he was a spy in the camp of the Red Riders.

CHAPTER XLVII.

A WOMAN'S FIGHT FOR LIFE.

WHEN Kate Maxwell left Phantom Falls, after the death of her father, it was with a desire to hide herself from all who knew her.

To one person only did she give her address, and that was to the village postmaster, and in strict confidence this was given.

She wished, should letters come for her from Marmaduke Marsden, to have them forwarded to her.

What was due of her father's salary she received, and the furniture and other things she could not take with her were sold out and she found herself set down in New York, an utterly strange city to her, without friends, and the whole of her fortune, some six hundred dollars, in her pocket.

She had said to no one that she held Mabrey Marsden guilty of her father's death, for she did not wish it to reach the ears of Marmaduke, as it might cause him to remain away from her.

Arriving in New York she took her time and looked about for pleasant rooms.

She found them, and made a little parlor that had good light in it a studio.

Then she set to work as an artist, unknown and friendless.

But though she painted well, and some of her little sketches were perfect gems, persons asked who Kate Maxwell was and did not purchase.

Had the paintings been far inferior, with the name of some well-known artist upon them, they would have brought large prices at once.

Furnishing her rooms and getting settled, with her rent paid six months in advance, had depleted her money, and she felt that if fortune did not favor her before very long she would be utterly destitute.

One day a gentleman stood in the art gallery gazing at a painting which had caught his eye.

He looked at it for a long while, enjoying it seemingly, for it was a bit of New England scenery.

He saw on the painting the name—

"KATE MAXWELL."

"Aha! at last!"

So saying, he went to the proprietor and said:

"Where did you get that painting?"

"A young lady left it here for sale."

"Do you know her address?"

"Here it is."

"Well, sir, a word to the wise is sufficient, so I advise you to send it back to her and refuse to take any more work she may send here, for a certain number of paintings were stolen in Boston, another name put on them, and you may be called upon to give them up some day."

"Who are you, sir?" asked the picture man, anxiously, for to strike his pocket was to draw on his life.

"I am a detective," was the reply, and he walked off.

The three paintings on hand were sent back with a note to send no more there.

Other picture-dealers were tried by the lovely young artist with like effect, until, convinced that her work was inferior, poor Kate gave up her brush and advertised for music pupils.

She received several, but they soon left her, from some reason.

Then she advertised for a position as governess.

She obtained a situation in a grand house upon the Hudson to teach two young girls.

The gentleman, a man of wealth, had called in answer to her advertisement and accepted her without a reference, simply upon her face.

She found the home a haven of refuge, and often went to the theater with her charges, and hoped that happiness might yet come to her.

One evening she accompanied the gentleman and his wife to the opera and occupied a box with them.

A man sat in the orchestra and swept the boxes with his glass.

He started as his eyes fell upon Kate Maxwell.

"She has escaped me for four months; but I'll not lose her now."

Could she have suspected that I was dogging her, that she so suddenly left her quarters in the city?

"How beautiful she is!"

The man was the same who had visited the art gallery, and had told the dealer that he was a detective.

As Kate left the opera with her friends, she did not see that she was followed to the carriage and that a coupe followed them to the hotel.

Two weeks after she left the happy home, for the gentlemen had "decided that it was best," but gave her no other reason, nor told her that he had had a visitor when in town who had advised him to get rid of the beautiful governess.

Kate was in despair and returned to the city.

She had less than a hundred dollars, and knew not what to do.

As she drove up to a hotel a familiar form and face passed.

He recognized her, raised his hat and passed on.

Half an hour after a letter came up to her room.

It read as follows:

"My last meeting with you has been one of constant regret, and remorse has made me suffer until you, did you wish for revenge, could have been more than gratified."

"I wrote your father, not then knowing of his death, and sent the letter by my mother."

"In that letter I begged your forgiveness, implored still your friendship, if not your love."

"I have sought to find you for a long while, to befriend you as one who is to be my brother's wife."

"Will you forgive, if you cannot forget the past, and let me see you once more, let me be to you as a brother?"

"Softened your heart toward me, and grant my request."

Kate Maxwell read the letter with conflicting emotions.

She was utterly friendless, and not a word had she heard from Marmaduke Marsden.

She had worked hard but to no use.

She had battled with the world, and had suffered.

Did she grant the request of Mabrey Marsden she knew it could lead to her becoming the mistress of vast wealth.

Her fight for life would end.

She had discovered that some one had been dogging her steps, for two of the picture-dealers had told her she was under suspicion, what they knew not.

The gentleman, in whose home she had been a governess, had handed her a card as she left, stating that if she wished to know why he had bid her leave to ask the one whose name he gave her.

She now seized her purse and glanced at the card.

It read:

"MABREY MARSDEN,

"Detective."

At once she saw all.

That man had sought to drag her down to beggary that he might come and force his aid upon her.

Instantly she turned to her desk and wrote:

"Mr. Mabrey Marsden has played the low detective, seeking to destroy a woman's name, to perfection."

"Should he again cross my path, I will see if the law cannot protect me from a libeler and a coward who persecutes a defenseless girl."

"I have just discovered that I owe all of my misfortunes to one whom I know now in his true colors."

"KATE MAXWELL."

When this note was handed to Mabrey Marsden, he turned pale, gritted his teeth, and muttering something to himself hastily left the hotel office.

"I must do it, for what else can I do?" said poor Kate, as she paced the room after having dispatched her letter to Marsden.

He heard my voice, and with his wife said

it would bring me a good salary, and I don't think they meant to flatter.

"I will write to him as a *dernier resort*."

She sat down and wrote:

"MR. DENIS DIXIE, *Manager Crescent Theatre*—

"DEAR SIR—When I had rooms in the same building with your wife and self, you heard me sing, and with Mrs. Dixie, were kind enough to say that you thought I would make a success upon the stage."

"I am alone, friendless, and misfortune has pursued me until I address myself to you, hoping that you can give me work, be the salary ever so small."

"My regards to your wife."

"With respect."

"KATE MAXWELL."

The letter was mailed and the next day came the reply:

"If Miss Maxwell will call at my office in the theater at once, I feel sure I can offer her an engagement that will be acceptable, as it is in a light opera company."

"Respectfully."

"DIXIE RICE."

Quickly did Kate Maxwell keep the appointment, and one week after she left the city under contract for a year's engagement with a most generous salary.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

OUTLAWS BUT NOT TRAITORS.

HARDLY had Surgeon Frank Powell departed from the scene of the robbery on the side of Red Top, when he felt a regret that he had told Buffalo Bill of the bold robbery of the miners.

"I fear he will attempt his bold plan of entering the retreat of the Red Riders, for that robber is surely one of the band, and Bill will trail him to the very end."

So said Frank Powell to himself, as he returned toward Danger station with the miners.

Arriving at the station, the men concluded to go on to the settlement, where they could get accommodations with Dr. Dunn, and then await tidings from the scout, as to whether he had tracked the man who had so cleverly gotten their gold.

Returning also to the settlement, Surgeon Powell found the prisoners safe, and their guards, the Chinese and negro making no complaint against them.

"They're as quiet as lambs, sir; but then they would be worse than wolves if they got the chance," Kansas said to the surgeon, while Buckskin added:

"Yas, gooddee man now; badee man if gettee way."

Frank Powell looked to the wounded men and saw that they were getting along finely, for the band of Ned Marsden was almost completely healed and the others were doing well.

"Marsden, I wish to see you," he said, as he called to the man to follow him away from the cabin which was used as a guard-house.

The man accompanied him to a bench not far distant and both sat down, the outlaw looking a trifle weary.

"Marsden, you are aware that I know you to be an outlaw, one of the Red Rider band, and I tell you frankly it will be best for you to make a clean breast of it and confess all."

"Your men are to be hunted down, and they will be taken, for there are those on their trail now that will track them to the end of the earth."

"Now, I offer you a chance for your life and pardon as well, for if you will guide me to the retreat at once, or give me information that will enable me to surprise the Red Riders' camp, I will pledge you that you shall be set free."

"Will you do as I ask you?"

"I cannot."

"Remember the consequences."

"What are they?"

"You are to be hanged."

"For what crime?"

"You are a Red Rider."

"You cannot prove it."

"I can prove that you are the pretended courier who came to the fort."

"Well?"

"And Buffalo Bill knows you to be a Red Rider."

"Buffalo Bill!"

And the man started.

"Yes."

"What does he know of me?"

"Enough to hang you."

The outlaw was silent, and Surgeon Powell resumed:

"You see the position you stand in?"

"I see it, yes."

"Some of the others will do what I ask you."

"No."

"You think so?"

"I know so."

"Well, I feel confident that fear and gold combined will make them turn traitors; but I ask you, for you are of a different stripe, and you show, whatever you may now be, that you were reared a gentleman."

"I was; but the world went against me, or perhaps I should say that I went against the world, and to-day I am what I am, whatever that may be."

"Then do as I ask you and begin life anew?"

"I will not, Surgeon Powell."
 "You make a mistake."
 "Perhaps so, and you have been kind to me and for it I thank you and would like to do as you ask; but there is one thing that I cannot do, and you will find that these men here with me, be they rough, wicked outlaws, or whatever they may be, they will not do as you ask for gold, for freedom, or to save themselves from the gallows."

The surgeon smiled incredulously at this, and Ned Marsden shrugging his shoulders said:

"Try them."
 "I will."
 "Try them one by one, and you can keep me where they will not see me in awhile."

"Buckskin!"
 "Allee lightee," and the Chinese appeared.
 "Watch this man," and the surgeon went to the log-house and called out one of the wounded men.

"My man, I wish to offer you your freedom, which means your life, and a good sum in gold, if you will guide me to the retreat of the Red Riders."

"I know nuthin' about 'em."
 "I know that you do."
 "Waal?"

"Do you wish to save your life by betraying them?"

"Ef I know'd I'd not tell nuthin'."
 "You'll be hanged."
 "You is the jedge, jury and executioner, Pard Doctor."

"You refuse?"
 "I knows nuthin'."

In vain did Surgeon Powell strive to induce the man to tell what he knew.

Not a word would he utter to commit himself or others.

Then another trial was made with like result, the third man equally firm in his determination not to betray what he knew.

"You were right, Marsden," he said.
 "Oh yes, we either are falsely accused of being Red-men, or there is some influence that prevents our betraying our comrades if outlaws we be," he said, with a smile.

"I know just what you are," replied Surgeon Powell, and he walked away.

The next day he was anxious to know if Buffalo Bill had returned, so he rode up to Danger Station.

Nothing had been heard by Nick Sawyer of the scout.

Thus several days passed away, and Silk-Ribbon Sam reported that letters deposited in the secret receptacle agreed upon between Buffalo Bill and himself remained there, none having been taken away.

"I will wait another day," the Surgeon Scout said, and as Silk-Ribbon Sam returned from his westward run and said other letters had come, but all were in the secret hiding-place, Frank Powell determined to act.

He first went to Red Top and visited the camp of Buffalo Bill.

He saw that it had not been occupied for some time.

Then he went down to where Buffalo Bill had taken the trail he had shown him, of the man who had so cleverly deceived the two miners and robbed them of their gold.

He saw where the scout had followed the trail, and continuing on he held his way until he came to the spot where the robber had joined his waiting horse in the canyon.

He saw that Buffalo Bill had followed directly on the trail of the horseman, and so he said:

"He has gone to the camp of the Red-men, for this trail leads toward the Wild Range, and he has carried out his determination to enter the retreat of the outlaws."

"If he has gone there, then he is either a prisoner—or dead."

"This I must find out, and the sooner the better, for this trail is well marked, and I can follow it as Cody did."

"But I want the men as a support should I have to attack the camp."

So saying Surgeon Powell returned to Red Top, took the accumulated letters from the secret hiding-place and read them.

They were from Buffalo Bill's spies, the scouts and soldiers stationed at the different stations along the Overland, and gave more or less information as to passengers going East and West, and anything of a suspicious nature which they had discovered.

Then Surgeon Powell returned rapidly to Danger Station, and arriving there just after dark, at once told Nick Sawyer of his discovery, and the two went together to the cabin of Silk-Ribbon Sam.

CHAPTER XLIX.

THE SURGEON'S ADVENTURE.

"SAM, I have come to tell you that I have fears of our soldier friend," said Surgeon Powell, addressing the Mad Driver, who had politely risen when the visitors had entered his cabin, and motioned them to seats.

He had been seated at a table, and upon a sheet of paper before him were several lines written, and one the eyes of the surgeon fell upon, and it was:

"Why can I not remember?
 "Am I really mad?"

At the remark of Surgeon Powell Silk-Ribbon Sam said:

"You mean the sergeant on Red Top?"
 "Yes."

"He is not there any more."
 "No, and I fear harm has befallen him."

"I don't know."
 "Well, I wish to send some letters by you to different men at the stations you go to, and they are to go to Red Top and camp."

"I will also send letters to others back on the line Eastward, for them also to go to Red Top, and there I will join them, and, if our friend has not returned, we will go in search of him to the retreat of the Red-men."

"Yes, to kill," said the Mad Driver, with a vehemence that startled his hearers.

"You will carry the letters for me, Sam?"
 "Oh, yes."

He said no more, but seemed to be growing nervous, and so Surgeon Powell arose and departed accompanied by Nick Sawyer, who remarked:

"That man is more and more of a mystery to me, Doc."

"Poor fellow, I would give much to see him recover his reason."

"Sometimes I almost think he is feigning madness for some purpose."

"No; he suffers, and no man could feign madness as he does."

"Yet he remembers many things, never makes a mistake in his duties, is just as good a driver as ever, is always on time, and always grows nervous when Red Top is mentioned."

"He had a fearful shock there, and by some severe shock again he may regain his reason."

"I am studying his case closely, Nick, and I believe he will one day be as sane as he ever was and clear up much that is a mystery to us now."

That night Surgeon Powell wrote the different letters, and Silk-Ribbon Sam took them with him on his run westward, while others were sent eastward by another driver to bring all the men picked by Buffalo Bill to the rendezvous at Red Top.

Soon after Silk-Ribbon Sam drove away from Danger Station Surgeon Powell mounted his horse and rode back to the settlement.

He went there to get supplies, a couple of pack-horses, and arrange for the expedition in search of Buffalo Bill, about whom he now began to feel the greatest anxiety.

He had gotten half a dozen miles from the station when suddenly a deer came bounding across the trail near him.

He was about to throw his rifle to his shoulder and fire, to get some fresh venison, when there came a shot from the timber on his left, and the deer fell dead.

The next instant a man bounded out into the trail, bent over the deer and drew his knife across its throat.

The man did not see the Surgeon Scout, who was within twenty paces of him.

The Surgeon Scout did the man, and he hailed him with:

"Hello, Tips!"

It was Tips, whose fate had so long been uncertain.

He sprung to his feet, grasped his empty rifle and turned upon the speaker in hostile attitude.

Seeing who it was, he lowered his rifle, and, turning quickly, walked off.

In an instant the spurs sunk into the flanks of his horse, and the surgeon was alongside of him.

"Tips, what ails you?"

"Don't you know me?"

"Oh yes, Doc, but don't talk to me, for I wish to be let alone."

"My God! are you mad, too?"

"Oh no! but go on, doctor, and don't ask me any questions."

"Tips, I shall not go on, and I will ask you questions, for I have a right to do so."

"You left the station to find out what Silk-Ribbon Sam was about in the lonely rides he takes, and you did not return, nor could any trace of you be found."

"Now out with the truth."

"Doc, won't you trust me and let me alone?"

"I'll trust you, yes; but we do not part company, Tips, until I know all."

"There is too much at stake for that, and besides, I must know something of Crosby, too, for I believe you can tell me about him."

Tips hung his head in evident confusion.

He glanced up into the face of the surgeon, and saw that firm resolve to know all.

Then he said:

"Let me get my game, and I will go with you up in the timber yonder."

"One minute, Tips."

"Yes, Doc."

"Do not attempt any trickery with me, for I will have none of it."

"There has been too much of that on this border, and I am determined to know just what you have played this game on us for."

"Doc, I'll not trick yer, but ef yer don't promise yer word as a gent and a soldier, thet

yer won't tell on me, I sw'ar I won't let yer know one word out o' my lips."

"I'll trust you Tips, so get your deer and come on up into the timber."

Tips walked to the deer and threw it over his shoulders.

Then he strode up into the timber, and was followed by the surgeon on horseback.

After getting out of sight of the trail, Tips stopped and threw down the deer.

"Now, Doc, what are it?"

"Why did you leave the station as you did, presumably to go upon the trail of the Mad Driver, and stay away, leaving all under the impression that Sam had killed you?"

"That's what they thought, did they?"

"Yes."

"Waal, he didn't?"

"No, but it might have gotten him into serious trouble."

"No, he are mad in a certain way, but he are knowin' enough fer that."

"You have not answered my question, Tips."

"Will yer promise not ter give me away, Doc?"

"You mean that I must not tell on you?"

"Yes."

"You do not wish it known that you are alive?"

"No, sir."

"And desire to still keep up this mystery?"

"That's just what I does."

"This is a strange request, Tips."

"It are a leetle out o' ther reg'lar for a man ter want ter seem ter be dead, when he are a livin' human bein'; but it are a fact in this case, and I wants yer ter have confidence enough in me ter promise what I axes yer ter do."

"I promise, Tips," was the reply of Surgeon Powell.

CHAPTER L.

TIPS HAS SOMETHING TO SAY.

"PARD DOC, I'm a-goin' ter trust yer fer all I is wuth, and I knows yer promise are as true as yer aim."

"It always has been, Tips, and when I go back on my word I'll despise myself."

"I knows it, for that are yer natur'."

"Well, I am all attention fer that story."

"I doesn't adzactly know how ter strike ther trail at ther start."

"At the time you left the station to go on the trail of the Mad Driver."

"Sure enough."

"Waal, Doc, I went out ter git a view o' jist what Silk Ribbons were about."

"I didn't suspect him o' no wrong-doing; but I did want ter know why it were he kept leavin' ther station when at home and stayin' away all day, pretendin' he were huntin' and mighty seldom fetchin' home any game."

"He were too good a shot fer that."

"Then Crosby he hed started out to find out about him, and Crosby hadn't tained up ag'in, and that looked mighty mysterious ter me."

"So I sets out on ther trail and I holds it fer some time."

"I think as how I'd got left ef I hed 'a' trusted to myself, fer I come ter whar ther were no trail."

"But I seen my horse were anxious ter push on and I jist gi'n him ther rein."

"He scented ther animile o' ther Mad Driver, who were not far ahead, and durned ef he didn't track him same as a dog would a man."

"I won't tell yer how he went and all that; but ef my horse hadn't foller'd him then I'd 'a' know'd nuthin' more than I does now."

"Then I recommembered thet ther Mad Driver hed once owned ther horse which Crosby hed, and he hed often rid him to ther place whar he went, wharever thet were."

"Thet are ther way, thinks I, thet Crosby hed found out whar ther Mad Driver goes."

"Then, too, I remembers as how one day Sam hed rid my horse, and I thinks maybe ther critter hain't so much follerin' by his nose as thet he knows whar he is agoin'."

"Wal, Pard Doc, I goes on all ther same, and suddenly I comes to a corral in a canyon, ther fence bein' across ther entrance, and made o' small trees."

"I were admirin' it all, when suddenly I seen a rifle-muzzle under my nose and I heer'd a voice sayin':"

"Pard Tips, I c'u'd kill yer ef I wanted ter."

"Yer hes no right ter dog my steps; but ef yer'll sw'ar ter do as I says, I'll spar' yer life."

"Ef yer don't, I'll kill yer like a wolf."

"Pard Doc, thet talk meant biz."

"It were ther Mad Driver a-talkin', and he hed me covered fer toes up."

"I promised all he axed, and more, too, you bet."

"Then he tells me ter hold up my hands and sw'ar."

"I did it."

"Then he says fer me ter come along with him."

"I did as he tole me, and it wasn't very long afore we come to a canyon ther likes o' which fer wildness I hasn't seen in many a long day."

"It did look ter me like ther yarth hed hed a

collision with one o' ther stars and hed split in two.

"It were a deep canyon, with almighty tall trees in it, bushes and thickets on ther sides, rocks piled up like hills, and a dozen different streams a-runnin' out o' as many different places.

"Then we came to a little spot just as pretty as anything.

"It were a leetle island, made o' streams dividin' and not over fifty feet long by twenty wide.

"There was a rock in ther center o' it, smooth and white, and standin' up like a monument.

"It were a nat'ral tombstone, I kin tell yer, and it were doin' duty as sich, fer thar in front of it were three graves."

"Graves?"

"Yas, Doc."

"Three of them?"

"Yas."

"Newly made?"

"Waal, one were all-fired new, Doc, for ther yarth were not dry on it."

"And the others?"

"T'other two were older, one of 'em lookin' as though it had been dug years afore, 'cause ther grass were growin' all over it.

"T'other didn't look fresh, maybe not over a year old."

"And the Mad Driver stopped there?"

"He jist leapt over ther brook and told me ter foller."

"I did it, and he said:

"You jist look thar, Tips."

"I looked, and axed him who were they thet was planted in thet bone-garden."

"And his answer?"

"Thet they was gents as hed undertook ter meddle in business as didn't consarn 'em."

"I see; he had killed 'em?"

"Waal, ther old grave were ther property o' one who hed owned a interest in thet canyon some years afore."

"The Mad Driver said so?"

"Waal, he p'inted to ther nat'ral tombstone, ther big rock, and invited me ter read ther Gos-pil writ thar on."

"Well?"

"I read:

"IN MEMORY

OF

An Indian chief who tracked me to this spot."

"He had killed him?"

"Not ther Mad Driver hedn't, but ther fu'st owner o' an interest in thet canyon hed."

"Ah!"

"Ther next were writ over ther second grave, and it were as follers:

"In Memory

OF

KIT MONDAY,

The desperado of the Overland, who sought to rob me of my own."

"I remember hearing of that man."

"Yes, Pard Doc, and he disappeared mysterious like, and we thought the Vigilantes had hanged him."

"Anyhow we was glad when he didn't tarn up."

"This were a leetle over a year or so ago, and I recommends as how he sed one day thet he were goin' ter git even with Silk-Ribbon Sam, and as he got kilt, I guess Sam got even on him fu'st."

"I should judge so; but were these inscriptions cut in the rock?"

"No, Pard Doc, jist painted with paint made o' red clay, sich as ther Injuns uses fer disfigerin' themselves with when on ther war-path."

"And the third grave?"

"The fresh one?"

"Yes."

"Waal, I kinder got a leetle squeamish when I seen what were writ on ther rock over thet."

"Do you mean you felt frightened, Tips?"

"Thet's jist what I does mean, Pard Doc."

"For what reason?"

"Yer see I were a long way from here, and I hed no right ter be doggin' ther trail o' ther Mad Driver."

"Well?"

"Then I know'd he were mad as a wolf."

"Yes, but what was painted on the rock to frighten you?"

"Crosby went out ther day ahead o' me on ther same errand?"

"True."

"Waal, Pard Doc, it were Crosby's grave," was the reply, in an earnest tone.

CHAPTER LI.

THE SECRET.

SURGEON FRANK POWELL seemed impressed with the knowledge that the newly-made grave in the secret canyon was that of Crosby, who had been sent by Nick Sawyer to dog the trail of Silk-Ribbon Sam and discover where he went on his lonely rides.

The Surgeon Scout had hoped, since seeing Tips had not met with any accident, that Crosby would also turn up all right.

But with Crosby dead, it looked bad for Silk-Ribbon Sam.

He was silent for a few minutes, and Tips did not interrupt his musings.

He seemed to appreciate the news he had spung upon the surgeon, and to enjoy the effect.

He looked like a man who had a reserve fire that was to create more amazement than the one delivered.

At last the Surgeon Scout spoke:

"Tips, you are sure it was Crosby's grave?"

"Waal, Pard Doc, I didn't dig down ter ther body; but my eyes didn't lie as ter what I seen writ on ther tombstone, nor is my ears a liar as ter what they heerd."

"What did you see?"

"It were what were writ on ther rock."

"What was it?"

"IN MEMORY

OF

CROSBY CRANE,

who, discovering a secret, sought to kill and rob the possessor of it."

"The Mad Driver had killed him?"

"He had."

"And did Crosby Crane try to rob him?"

"Waal, he did."

"You are sure of this?"

"Sart'in."

"Tell me all you know about it?"

"Waal, Pard Doc, Crosby let his horse do ther trailin', seein' as ther Mad Driver hed rid him thar afore, and he got to ther corral in ther canyon, and seen Sam a-goin' up a tree."

"He watched him, seen him climb out on a limb and then step onto a ledge o' rocks."

"Crosby slung his rifle on his back an' clum' thet tree, too."

"He got out on ther ledge o' rocks, and he seen a distinct trail, which he follered."

"Then, arter some distance he come upon the secret which Silk-Ribbon Sam hed been hidin' so long."

"He seen ther Mad Driver down in a canyon and at work."

"What was he doin'?"

"He were pleasantly workin' a-gettin' out a leetle gold."

"Gold?"

"Yas, Doc, gold out o' a stream, out o' pockets and a-pickin' it out o' ther sides o' ther canyon."

"Can this be possible?"

"It are not onpossible, pard."

"Well, tell me more."

"It were no reg'lar mine, do yer know, but a canyon full o' surprises, with ther best o' pickin' here and thar, washes and pockets, and ther Mad Driver were makin' money at ther rate o' heaps o' gold a day."

"And Crosby?"

"Thar's whar he overreached himself."

"How?"

"He were thet excited he forgot all judgment."

"As nobody know'd o' ther secret, he concluded, I guess, he'd keep it to himself."

"To do this he hed ter kill ther Mad Driver."

"If he kilt Sam, then ther mine would hev been his, by force ef not by law."

"So Crosby he decides ter put a bullet in Mad Sam."

"He ups with his rifle and takes aim."

"Now, he were so confusated by what he seen thet he hed lost his good sense, and thet were strange, fer he hed been a scout yer know, and a good one."

"But he were atween ther sun and Mad Sam, and right onto ther edge o' a cliff."

"Ther result were his shadow fell onto Silk-Ribbon, and he spotted him."

"He turned quick, and maybe it saved his life."

"Maybe, too, Crosby were that excited he would hev missed him, anyhow; but he did miss him, ther bullet cuttin' through Sam's hat."

"But Sam are a shooter ter kill, as yer knows, Pard Doc, and his revolver pulled on Crosby afore he could recover from his surprise, and down he came inter ther canyon."

"Dead?"

"Of course."

"It served him right."

"Thet are my obituary notice of him, when I know of ther facts."

"Silk-Ribbon Sam told you?"

"Yas, Doc, in his queer way, and he p'inted out ther situation."

"He buried Crosby and writ his eppitaff—hain't thet a boss word, Doc?—on ther rock, and he jist kept his gun and other weepins, with his horse, fer future reference."

"And yet he said nothing of this at Danger Station."

"He didn't need to, for he concluded as how it were his secret."

"Poor fellow!"

"Waal, now, he hain't so poor as yer might think, Pard Doc."

"How do you mean?"

"He hev a clean fortin' up thet canyon."

"And how was it he didn't kill you?"

"I were not, in ther fu'st place, seekin' ter kill him."

"I were a-trailin' him, that are a fact; but I did not mean no harm to him, as he knowed."

"Then, too, I nursed him when he were sick, and he felt kinder good toward me."

"That were why he let me meddle, as I hed no right ter do."

"I do not blame him for protecting his property, and of course his life."

"But what of yourself?"

"Waal, Pard Doc, we hed a leetle talk together, and, as I told yer, I swore as how I'd do as he axed me."

"Soon as I did thet, he trusted me and tuk me right to ther canyon whar ther gold-find were."

"He tained my horse inter ther corral with his and Crosby's, and then led me to ther place whar I tole yer I seen them graves."

"Waal, it were a kind o' a dismal warnin' ter me to see thet bone-garden; but I kept on with Mad Sam, and then he tole me as how he hed a mine."

"He sot down on a rock and rubbed his hand over his head, as you has seen him do, and arter awhile talked real sensible."

"He said as how he hed pertected a stranger one day, in a minin'-camp, but he hed been kilt and left him a map o' his mine, ther one whar we was, and half o' it was ter be his, fer ther gittin' of ther gold."

"He didn't recommender what else he was ter do; but said as how he thought he hed done it, for he had sent off a lot o' gold."

"Then he got excited and said it had been tuk from him, and blood hed been spilt and all thet."

"I let him run on, and he said as how he were still a-workin', and, as I hed promised, I hed ter pretend ter be dead and stay right there and work gittin' gold until I hed got a fortin' fer us, and he'd give me a handsome sum out o' it."

"I hed promised, and so I kept my word, and when he lays off at Danger Station he comes here and works with me, and brings me some supplies, and I gits on all right."

"But I wanted some deer-meat and so went arter it and run upon you."

"I intends ter stick here, Pard Doc, and you has given me yer word yer won't say nothin', and I'm glad yer knows what yer does, as yer is posted, and kin keep me aware o' what is transpirin' along ther Overland."

"And is there a fortune in the mine, Tips?"

"There are, and ther Mad Driver will be a rich man afore long, while I won't be no slouch."

"I believes thet Sam hes been a-workin' ther canyon ever since he tuk ter drivin' on ther Overland, and thet are why he are anxious ter drive here and choosed Danger Station and westward as his run."

"He hev certainly got considerable out o' it, and it may be thet he was robbed of it, as he said."

"He doubtless was, and at the time of the massacre of those in his coach, and that may account for the false bottom to the stage, under the back seat, which you know was found, as well as some gold-dust being discovered in it."

"That's so, Doc; but I must git back ter work now, and I'm a-trustin' on yer, as yer knows."

"You can depend upon me, Tips."

"I know that; but ef yer has anything ter communicate to me, jist drop a line and put it under this rock, and I'll make it my biz ter come here every other day ter luk and see."

"All right, Tips, and I hope there will be something to communicate soon, for there are matters on foot that may pan out largely in a few days."

"I thank you for your confidence and will say good-by, for I must be going on my way, as I have considerable to do before night."

"Good-by, Doc, and luck to yer," answered Tips, and having seen the Surgeon Scout ride away he threw the deer upon his shoulder and started for the secret canyon of the Mad Driver.

CHAPTER LII.

PUT TO THE TEST.

WHEN Buffalo Bill was taken to the cabin that had been the home of Red Robin, the dead outlaw lieutenant, he congratulated himself upon his success.

He felt sure that not a suspicion had entered the mind of the chief of the Red Riders that all was not right, and he was sure that he could do much while in the camp of the outlaws to bring them to justice.

He had trailed the chief to his lair, and he had caught him counting his stolen gold.

He had found the outlaws' retreat was not impregnable, and he guessed at their number.

In the hammock his keen eyes had detected a feminine form, but he had not seen her face.

The face of King Velvet had surprised him by its manly beauty, and he wondered that a man so blessed with all to make up magnificent manhood could fall so low as to be a wayside robber and a cruel outlaw.

What he was to do he hardly knew yet; but he was in the den of lions and must make the best of it.

He found the cabin of Red Robin small but comfortable, but set to work to make himself as cheerful as he could under the circumstances.

"When am I to take this oath?" he asked, just a trifle nervous as to what he would have to swear to.

"It will be to-night, sir," said the outlaw, respectfully.

The Scout Spy supposed that he would have to do some tall swearing, but he compromised with his conscience by saying that it was in the line of duty.

He soon set to work about the cabin and made things comfortable to suit himself.

A man came over and cooked supper for him, and a guard paced near his cabin, for, until he had taken the test oath, he was not looked upon as a member of the band of Red Riders.

His supper was a tempting one, and he was surprised at the manner in which the outlaws lived.

There was some bacon, broiled on the coals, a partridge, venison-steak, baked potatoes, wheat hoe-cake and coffee.

He enjoyed the meal immensely.

Then he lighted his pipe and sat down to muse upon his danger and the likelihood of his coming out of it all right.

The sunset gilded the mountain-tops long after the glen was hidden in darkness.

A bugle-call had sounded just before sunset, and the horsemen had ridden off in different directions.

A quarter of an hour after he had seen two horsemen coming toward the camp, one from one side of the glen, the second from the other side.

One he recognized as the sentinel who had fired upon him.

Then the night deepened, camp-fires were built here and there near the cabins of the men.

From the next hut came the sound of a banjo, and over in a cabin on the other side some one was playing a familiar air upon the accordeon.

Then all sounds hushed as the clear notes of a flute were heard, followed by the low thrumming of a guitar.

The flute-player began an old air.

It was a ballad of forty years ago, and joining in was a woman's voice.

The voice rose clear as a bird's, and as beautiful.

Every note was perfect, the tones rich and the singing most sympathetic.

The flute played an alto to the voice, and there was a guitar accompaniment.

The effect upon the Scout Spy was a strange one.

He was moved deeply, until tears were in his heart.

No other sounds broke the stillness of the valley.

Could it be that this was an outlaw camp?

Could it be that he was in the retreat of the Red-men?

In those weird surroundings the scout could almost believe that he was listening to the voice of an angel.

Song after song was sung, until the flute ceased and the rich tenor of a man took its place.

It was the voice of King Velvet, joining in with that of the woman.

At last the voices ceased, the camp-fires had flickered out, and the outlaws, as though unwilling to break the spell cast upon them by the music, returned quietly to their cabins, to the relief of Buffalo Bill, who had feared that the accordeon would begin again.

But it did not.

The sentinel passed near, keeping him under guard; but at last came toward him and said:

"Come with me, sir, to The Chapel."

"The Chapel?" asked the scout, with surprise.

"Yes, sir."

"There the Devil has prayers," he muttered to himself, but said aloud:

"Do you have church here?"

"It is the Oath Lodge; but the boys call it The Chapel."

"Ah!"

The scout went with the guard up to a spur that overhung the glen.

It was a rugged climb, and upon it, right on the edge of the cliff was a round cabin, some twelve feet in diameter and with a peaked roof.

The guard said:

"Knock at the door, for I leave you here."

The scout spy obeyed.

"Who is there?" asked a deep voice.

"One who would enter."

"Your name?"

"Dave Dawson."

"What are you?"

"A soldier deserter."

"Why do you come?"

"To join the band."

"What band?"

"The outlaws whom men call the Red-men and the Red Riders," and Buffalo Bill began to fret under the questioning he received.

"Do you know their calling?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"Highway robbery and murder."

"Yet you wish to join?"

"I do."

"Your reason?"

"If I had not escaped, as one who had committed a crime and deserted, I would have been hanged."

"Enter!"

He stepped into the room, for the door opened, and brave as he was, iron nerves though he had, he started at what he beheld.

The cabin had but one room, it seemed, and that was hung all around in black.

At the further end of the room was something that looked like an altar, and upon it was a large brass crucifix, a Bible upon one side, a human skull, white as snow, upon the other.

There was a knee-rest for one to kneel before it, and two candles gave a dim light to the somber surroundings.

In the very center of the cabin, with the earth piled upon one side, and a pick, a spade and a shovel sticking in the loose earth, was a grave that looked as though freshly dug.

There was no one within the gloomy cabin that the scout could see.

No wonder that it was called a chapel.

It looked like a death-chapel.

On the other side of the grave was a coffin, painted black.

Then, after the scout had stood a moment in silent contemplation of the place and its surroundings, a voice, coming from he knew not where, asked:

"Do you, David Dawson, come here in good faith to take the oath that will make you one of the band of Red Riders?"

It was a direct question.

Buffalo Bill had always expressed his hatred of a deliberate liar.

Under this question he could but lie squarely, and he hesitated before he answered.

But to hesitate then was to die, he felt sure, and to ruin all he had thus far accomplished.

"I've got to go ahead now, or I am a dead man," he mused, and he responded in a voice that was firm:

"Yes, I, Dave Dawson, have come to join the Red Riders."

"Then you shall take the test-oath," responded the voice, and from behind the altar came a form clad in deepest black, but wearing a blood-red mask that caused a strange effect; and, iron-nerved as he was, Buffalo Bill half shrunk back as the weird figure approached him.

CHAPTER LIII.

THE REFUSAL.

THE form that approached the scout was slender, he could see, and not of high stature.

The movements were graceful, and halting by the side of the scout, he started as he heard the voice.

It seemed to be the same voice, but now he knew that the one he had listened to had been disguised, for that he now listened to was rich, low and womanly.

"You are willing to take the oath?"

"Yes."

"Kneel there!"

The speaker pointed to what Buffalo Bill had supposed to be a kneeling-bench before the black altar.

Now he saw that it was a child's coffin.

He hesitated.

"Obey!"

He knelt, and the woman, for such he now knew her to be, took one of his hands and placed it upon the skull.

Her hand was as cold as ice, he noticed, as it touched his.

Then she took his right hand and placed it upon the Bible.

The crucifix was drawn forward until his forehead rested against it.

He felt like springing to his feet and dashing away from the appalling scene.

But he controlled himself and remained silent and still.

"Are you ready for the oath?"

"I am."

"Let me tell you that he who takes this oath and breaks it is forever accursed, waking, sleeping, at all times, and when he comes to die is eternally damned."

"That don't make it so," thought Buffalo Bill, but he shuddered in spite of himself.

"Before I ask you to take it I will repeat it to you."

"Then you can refuse or not."

"If I take it?"

"You are a Red-man for life and death."

"If I refuse?"

"You have seen the grave behind you?"

"Yes."

"You have seen the coffin to one side?"

"Yes."

"If you refuse, that coffin is for you and that is your grave."

"It is many, many feet deep, and there are five bodies in there now."

"One refused, and was buried, a layer of earth covering him, but the grave remaining open."

"Another refused, and a like fate met him, and so on five times."

"And such will be my fate?"

"Yes; I have but to give a signal, and you will be shot down by an unseen foe, and that will be your end."

"If you take the oath and break it, then, if captured or discovered, you will be buried alive in this grave."

"Has any one ever broken it?"

"No."

Buffalo Bill felt that he could understand how it was that Ned Marsden and the other Red Rider prisoners had refused to accept a bribe or promise of their lives to betray their comrades.

"You are a prisoner here in this cabin, and could not get out did you try."

"Now listen to the oath."

"I am ready."

And as he spoke the Scout Spy felt that his throat was parched.

The woman then began to repeat in a low voice, earnest and quivering:

"I hereby vow before High Heaven, with my right hand upon the Bible, my left hand upon the skull of a human being, kneeling as I do upon the coffin of a child, with my own grave at my back, my forehead pressed against a crucifix, that—"

"Hold on!"

The scout spoke hoarsely and with startling sternness.

"Well?"

"You need repeat no more of that infernal oath, for I will not take it."

"You have not heard it."

"I have heard enough."

"Why, I would be accursed did I utter it."

"It is far more terrible yet, for it vows by all holy things, love, religion and—"

"I will not take it."

"You heard the penalty."

"I did; but I will not take it."

"I can signal for help and you die."

"I will die like a man then, before I stain my lips with that infamous blasphemy."

"You are decided?"

"I am, so now signal for aid," and he seized the heavy crucifix as a weapon, determined to defend himself to the last against whatever, or whoever might oppose him.

"Put that crucifix back and hear me!"

"I will not."

"Obey me, for I know you, Buffalo Bill, and penetrated your disguise."

"Put up that crucifix and hear me, for I am your friend."

"My friend?" and the scout replaced the crucifix.

"Yes."

"Who are you?"

"King Velvet's wife."

"An outlaw's wife?"

"Yes, I love him."

"My God! I pity you."

"A woman is not to be pitied when she is with the man she loves and who loves her."

"Circumstances alter cases."

"Not in my case do they; but you have refused the oath?"

"I have."

"Were you other than you are my duty would be plain."

"And that duty?"

"To signal your death."

"Why not with me?"

"I owe you my life, a life you nobly risked yours to save."

"Do you speak the truth?"

"I do."

"Who are you?"

"I will tell you a secret."

"Do so."

"I am she whom you knew as Mrs. Braxton."

"Ha! and who disappeared so mysteriously from the fort?"

"Yes, and I was on my way to join King Velvet then."

"The courier who came to the fort was my husband's agent."

"Indeed! I am glad to know this," but the scout did not say why.

He did not mention the fact that the bogus courier was then a prisoner.

"I came to him because I loved him, and my duty is to administer the oath that you have refused."

"Now, I recognized you as Buffalo Bill, for you have not a face to forget, in spite of the uniform you now wear, and having shaved close and cut off your long hair."

"You are Buffalo Bill, and you came into the camp of the Red Riders as a spy, but the Test Oath brings you to bay, as I expected it would."

"Now, you understand the situation, Buffalo Bill?"

"I most certainly do," was the response of the scout.

CHAPTER LIV.

A WOMAN'S GRATITUDE.

THAT Buffalo Bill did understand the situation there was not an atom of doubt.

He was in the lion's den, and his head was in the jaws of the beast most likely to destroy.

"What is to be done, Buffalo Bill?"

The woman asked the question in an earnest way.

"I give it up," was the off-hand response of the scout.

"I do not wish to see you die."

"I wouldn't like to witness it myself," and the scout laughed in his reckless way.

"If you agree to what I demand, I will give you a chance for life."

"What do you demand?"

"Your vow to me that you will leave this camp—I will give you an excuse for doing so—and never come here again, alone or with others, nor direct, by word or act how it can be found."

"These are hard terms."

"Your life is surely at stake."

"I do not doubt that."

"Let me tell you that I have much to do to save you."

"How so?"

"I must lie."

"I've been something of a liar myself lately."

"I will have to state that you took the oath."

"Which I did not."

"True, but that is to be my lie, and more, I will have to see you made a lieutenant in this band, for my husband had determined that it shall be so, having taken a wonderful fancy to you."

"He is very kind; but as lieutenant, in the absence of Chief King Velvet, as you call him, I could order the whole outfit to be hanged."

"You joke over a grave, Buffalo Bill."

"I realize the situation, though."

"Well, if you pledge me your word to give up the man-hunt you are on to run down the Red Riders, I will let you go free, giving you the chance to do so."

"What others may do, I will not hold you responsible for; but I do hold you to your oath, if you give it, not by word or deed to aid in the hunt for these outlaws."

"Never!"

"Well, I'll make the pledge for one year."

"If I refuse?"

"Then, so help me Heaven I will leave you to your fate, for though I would serve you for saving me from death, the life of King Velvet is dearer to me than all else, and he shall not be taken and hanged."

"From my heart I pity you."

"I do not want your pity."

"I wish you to give your solemn pledge as I ask it."

"I am not anxious to die, and I cannot see how I could get out of this bad scrape, except by giving you my pledge, so I will do it."

"Upon your honor?"

"Yes."

"Give me your hand on it."

The scout did so, and the woman grasped it warmly.

"To-morrow, or next day, or soon at least, you will get orders to go on a secret mission, for I shall tell King Velvet that you spoke of knowing of a paymaster's treasure to soon come through, and could go and find out just which trail it will take."

"When you are once free of the Wild Range, go back to the fort, and remember, for one year do you not attempt to hunt down King Velvet and his men."

"By that time we will be away, and I hope to reform my misguided husband; but, rich or poor, honest man or outlaw, living or dying on the gallows, if it comes to that, I will never desert King Velvet."

"You are a noble woman, at least, and I thank you."

"Now, can I get out of this graveyard?"

"Yes—come!"

She led the way to the door, opened it in some mysterious way and said:

"Remember, David Dawson, you took the test oath, and are a Red-man of the Rocky Mountains."

Out into the fresh air went Buffalo Bill, deeply impressed.

The guard was not visible, and he returned to his cabin; but yet he felt that the eyes of the man were upon him.

He retired to sleep, but after what he had passed through it was a long while before he could sleep.

When he did so he slept soundly, and the sun was up when he awoke.

The chief called upon him, congratulated him upon "being one of them," and invited him to breakfast with his wife and himself.

This he did, and then, much against his grain, he donned the red garb of the Riders.

The chief, with not the slightest doubt of his honesty of purpose, or that he had been deceived by his wife about him, showed him about the stronghold and acquainted him with the customs of the Red Riders.

"Oh, if I was not bound by my pledge," groaned Buffalo Bill one day.

Days passed away, and King Velvet came to his cabin and said:

"I have decided to make a strike for that paymaster's train you spoke of, so I will let you disguise yourself as a miner and go and find out which trail it takes."

"Do you think you dare undertake it alone?"

"Yes, sir."

"You do not fear being recognized?"

"No, sir."

"Nor captured?"

"I will risk it."

"Do so; and the sooner you start, the better."

"Shall I ride my horse?"

"Yes; it would be best."

"I will start to-night, sir."

"Do so."

And Buffalo Bill started.

CHAPTER LV.

A DYING CONFESSION.

A RAILROAD train was dashing swiftly along through the darkness, and its passengers, little dreading danger or death, were chatting away pleasantly.

A number of people in a first-class car had been gazing admiringly upon a lonely girl who sat by herself, her beautiful face and exquisite form seeming to win the hearts of all.

A lady, wearing a heavy veil sat not far from her and could not keep her eyes off of the beautiful girl.

At last she leant forward to a gentleman in front of her and said:

"Pardon me, sir; but may I ask you if you know who that lady is?"

"Yes, madam, she is one of our opera company, the star in fact, and her name is Kate Hammersley."

"Ah! the new operatic star of whom I have heard so much of late?"

"Yes, madam, and we have just closed our season and are all returning home to New York, for I am one of the company."

"I thought that I had met her, but she cannot be the one I supposed her to be."

Hardly had she uttered the words when there came a wild shriek from the locomotive, a jerking, jarring, and a terrific crash and then an instant of deathlike silence.

But an instant only and then arose wild cries of alarm, groans and calls to each other.

"Who of you are hurt?" called out a clear, womanly voice, rising from the floor of the car, and she looked about her, for the lamps had not gone out.

"None of the company are badly hurt, Miss Hammersley, but this lady seems to be seriously injured," said the gentleman who had answered the lady's questions about the star.

The lady referred to was the one who had questioned him.

She was unconscious, had been hurled upon the seat before her with terrific force, and blood was upon her lips.

Instantly Kate Hammersley was by her side, and a summer-hotel being near the scene of the accident she had her borne there and a physician called.

"You are—" said the lady, as her eyes beheld the actress bending over her.

"Kate Hammersley, for, as an actress I have taken my mother's maiden name."

"You know me?"

"Yes, Mrs. Marsden."

"There is the doctor—ask him if I will die."

"There is not any hope," the doctor responded, "for she is injured internally, and it is but a question of a few hours."

"Then let me speak while I can! Kate Maxwell, I wish to make a dying confession to you, and you must have a notary here to take it down and the doctor as a witness."

"A confession, Mrs. Marsden?"

"Yes; for I have grievously sinned."

In a short while a notary came from the village, and a clergyman and the doctor were also present.

Then the dying woman said:

"Kate, Mabrey Marsden loved you, and I was in hopes that he would make you his wife; but Marmaduke came and I saw that you loved him."

"Now, when my husband died a will was left that was supposed to be his, along with a confession to Marmaduke, but neither the will nor the confession did he make! *They were forgeries, the work of my son Mabrey!*

"The will of my husband left his wealth to me and to his real son, and the confession was that Mabrey was not his child, but he left him a good sum to start in life."

"The forged will left all to Mabrey, my son, and a pittance to Marmaduke."

"Now my husband had been married before he made me his wife, and he had one boy, Marmaduke, whose mother died in giving him birth."

"When Mr. Marsden married me I was a widow with one child, and I named him Mabrey after my husband, and I asked a pledge from him that he would never let the two boys know they were not own brothers."

"This pledge he kept until just before he died."

"Then, knowing that my son and myself were plotting against Marmaduke, he intended to come out with the whole truth."

"He was so ill, and it was so easy to administer to him a medicine that would keep him from recovery."

"I did it, and he died, so I murdered him."

"I told this to my son, who was innocent there, and he arranged the bogus will and confession."

"Thus we threw Marmaduke out of his inheritance, and my son now possesses all."

"This is my confession and I make it with the fear of God before me, and with death creeping over me."

"To you, Kate Maxwell, I leave a sacred duty."

"Will you do it for me?"

"I will."

"You give me your promise?"

"I do."

"Write to my son that you know all, and that my confession is known to others, and send the letter by Marmaduke's lawyer, who will cause him to sign away all papers in favor of the rightful heir and then depart forever."

"This must be kept a secret unless he refuses, and in that case he must be made to suffer."

"Then do you go in person to Marmaduke Marsden."

"He is a driver on the Overland stage-route to the far West."

"He wrote you a letter, telling you that he was making a fortune to offer you, and would some day seek you to make you his wife."

"He said that he was known only as Silk Ribbon Sam, and besides his driving a stage over the Rocky Mountains, he was working a mine and getting rich."

"This was six months ago, and the letter was placed by mistake in our box at Phantom Falls, and Mabrey opened and read it to me."

"Now go to that poor man and tell him of my dying confession."

"Will you do this for me?"

"I will."

"Tell my son, in your letter to him, to try and live an honest life."

"How strange it is that I should have met you upon this train, and death should have forced from me my confession."

"But it is so ordained."

She said little more, signed her confession, it was witnessed, and, determined to keep her secret, Kate had her body buried with all honors, and then sought the attorney she had named in New York and placed the matter in his hands.

He departed at once for Mount Vista, and three days after returned.

"He was there?" she asked, eagerly.

"Yes; and, startled at his mother's death, frightened by her confession, he signed everything as I demanded."

"And then?"

"He took the money in cash his mother had, sold out his personal effects, and sails for Europe to-day in the steamer."

"He is thoroughly alarmed, and will never give you more trouble, I know."

"Now I will go in search of Mr. Marmaduke Marsden. You have the letter she referred to?"

"Yes; here it is."

And the lawyer handed over Silk-Ribbon Sam's intercepted letter.

Two days after Kate Maxwell started for the far West.

CHAPTER LVI.

THE SURGEON SCOUTS CLEVER TRICK.

WHEN Buckskin and Kansas were taken from guarding the prisoners by Surgeon Powell, the two miners who had lost their money were asked to look after them.

These, however, told Surgeon Powell that they knew he was going on some bold expedition and wished to accompany him, so the prisoners were left to the care of Doctor Dunn.

At Danger Station Surgeon Powell got as recruits also Silk-Ribbon Sam, who was off duty for a couple of days, and Nick Sawyer, and then all started for Red Top.

The scouts and soldiers were found at the rendezvous, and the ten of them, with the two miners, Nick Sawyer, Silk-Ribbon Sam and the negro and Chinnee gave Surgeon Powell a force of sixteen well-mounted, thoroughly armed men.

"They are enough," he said to himself, for he knew them.

It was daylight when they started, and the Surgeon Scout led, following the trail without difficulty, for Buffalo Bill had so marked it that any good trailer could do so, and there were none better than Frank Powell.

It was night when they reached the canyon that ran into the Wild Range, and there they halted.

The trail could not be followed by night, so they must wait until the morrow.

The Surgeon Scout was about to give the command to go into camp for the night, when suddenly he beheld a horseman.

There was no chance for either party to hide, had they wished to.

"It's Buffalo Bill!" said the surgeon to Nick Sawyer.

The horseman had ridden into view, halted, half-turned and then came forward.

Frank Powell rode forward to meet him.

"How are you, Bill, and do you know we were on your trail?"

Their hands clasped, but in the twilight the surgeon saw that the scout was worried.

"You ask me how I am, Frank, and I will say the saddest man on earth, for I know just what you are going to do and I cannot join you."

"Cannot, Bill?"

"No."

"We thought the Reds had you, and here we are, seventeen strong, going to attack them in their camp."

"I cannot join you."

"But why?"

"I will tell you frankly."

"I am under a pledge not to do so."

"A pledge?"

"It was the only way I could save my life and get away."

"Life is sweet to all of us, Frank, so I gave my pledge in honor, and you see how I stand."

"I do, and you did right; but you were in the camp of the Philistines?"

"Yes."

"Where is it?"

"I cannot tell you."

"How far away?"

"I can say nothing."

"At least tell me how many are there of them?"

"I will not."

"Have they a sentinel out?"

"You will find that out as you go along."

"Tell me if you were known there as Buffalo Bill or Dave Dawson the Deserter?"

"I see no breach of pledge in saying I was known as the latter."

"And where are you going now?"

"I had started for Red Top to break up my Mounted Detectives and return to the fort."

"It was so bad as that?"

"Yes; but you have taken command so save me that to do."

"And now?"

"I'll return to the fort, report to Captain Carrol my situation, as in honor bound, and tell him that you have charge of the Mounted Detectives, and, if I mistake not he'll hear from you before long in a way that will be glad tidings to him."

"That encourages me, and I'll go on, as soon as I explain to the boys your situation."

"Pray do so."

"I will, so that they will understand it; but, Bill, as you are going to the fort, take my horse, who is a little fagged, and let me have Black Boy."

"Certainly," answered Buffalo Bill; but, shrewd as he was, he suspected nothing, and did not see the smile on Frank Powell's face at his readily given consent to change horses.

The saddles and bridles were quickly changed and, mounting, Buffalo Bill rode on, with the warning:

"Don't be reckless, Frank, for good fellows like you are scarce."

When the scout disappeared, Surgeon Powell explained to the men exactly the situation as he understood it.

The sympathy of all was with Buffalo Bill.

Then the surgeon said:

"Men, as I had to act on my own responsibility, the idea struck me it would be better to go on to-night, and, as I could not see the trail, I concluded that Buffalo Bill's horse, having just come from the retreat, could readily return there."

"Fortunately, Buffalo Bill suspected nothing and exchanged horses with me, so, as soon as we have had supper, we will go on to the Red Riders' Retreat, for Black Boy is under no pledge."

Half an hour after, mounted on Black Boy, Surgeon Powell gave him the rein and the noble horse moved on as though he knew just what was expected of him.

The surgeon rode some little distance ahead, so as not to confuse the horse, and after a couple of hours' riding felt that he must be near the sentinel, for he was sure that the outlaws had one on duty.

"Halt!" suddenly rung out from among the rocks ahead.

"All right; Dave Dawson, the Deserter, who passed you awhile ago," was the quick reply of the surgeon.

"What! has yer come back, lieutenant?"

"Yes, I came upon something that looked very suspicious, so turned back to see the chief."

"What were it?"

"Something like this!" and the surgeon's revolver was pressed into the face of the sentinel, and the words followed:

"Move an inch, or cry out, and you are a dead man!"

"Oh Lord!"

It was all the sentinel said, and, slipping up to him, having dismounted and come forward on foot, Silk-Ribbon Sam disarmed and bound him in an instant.

He was tied to his horse and placed in the rear, the last man holding his bridle-rein; then Black Boy led the way once more down the pass to the glen, and in the starlight the cabin could be seen.

Here and there was a light, one or two fires burned dimly, and the Mounted Detectives were in the retreat of the Red Riders of the Rocky Mountains.

The prisoner would give no information; not a word could be gotten from him, for to all questions he shook his head.

Then suddenly he uttered a wild yell of alarm.

It gave the alarm, but it cost him his life, for Buckskin shot him through the head.

Fortunately it was a good thing for the attacking party, for the Red-men came dashing out of their cabins, and, in the darkness, could not at first see their foes.

But their foes saw them, and the rifles rung out rapidly.

Down went half a dozen Red-men. Then the

firing became fierce on both sides, the outlaws retreating to the ledges behind their cabins, several of which had been set on fire.

But the Detective Scouts pressed them closely, and in the lead with Surgeon Powell was the Mad Driver, his every shot telling.

Buckskin was wounded, one of the two miners fell from his horse, dead, Nick Sawyer got a wound in the arm, and a soldier and a scout were killed.

But the Red Riders suffered terribly. A few surrendered, others made their escape to the north pass, mounting the horses they always kept back of their cabins at night for use in an emergency.

Seeing that all was lost, King Velvet had buckled around his own waist and that of his wife a belt heavy with gold, and placing her in her saddle, had mounted himself, and started for the north pass out of the glen.

He found half-a-dozen of his men, the remnant of the Red Riders, but ordered them to scatter as soon as they had passed through into the valley beyond.

This they did, and he sped on with his wife and his gold, of which he had only saved a few thousand dollars.

"Stella, did you see that splendid-looking fellow, by the light of Red Robin's burning cabin, fighting like a madman?"

"Yes."

"That was the man I feared, and we owe this to him, for he is Silk-Ribbon Sam!"

"The Mad Driver you told me had defended your father-in-law, Mr. Lennox, and then got his mine?"

"Yes, and hunted for and found my child, my little daughter, who you know I discovered did not die with her mother in the storm that night. She was adopted by a miner, who took her home with him. Silk-Ribbon Sam traced them out and sent for them, with their son and my child to come West."

"I did not know this, and Red Robin massacred all in the stage-coach, as he knew Silk-Ribbon Sam had hidden away thirteen bags of gold which he had given my child as her share."

"I was not there, and so he killed my child and those who adopted her, and the boy, so you can understand what a shock it was to the driver and why it turned his brain."

"I only knew all this by my spy, who came in to-day, and I have my punishment, God knows, for I am to bear this remorse to the grave. I have a few thousands in gold, and we can fly far from here, and in honest work I will try to drown bitter memories."

"And I will share with you your sorrows, Braxton," responded the woman whose love remained true through all.

And on, into the night they rode, but whither no one knew, for King Velvet, the chief of the Red Riders, and his beautiful bride were never heard of more by those who tried to trace them, and the attack of Buffalo Bill's mounted scouts utterly wiped out the Red-men of the Overland trail, for those not slain were quickly hanged by the Vigilantes to save the expense of a trial for their crimes.

CHAPTER LVII.

CONCLUSION.

THE triumph of the Mounted Detectives was complete, and they returned to the fort loaded with spoils, bearing a full account of the affair to Captain Carrol from Surgeon Powell, who, with Buffalo Bill, who had hung off awaiting the result, convinced what it would be, went on with Silk Ribbon Sam and the wounded Sawyer to Danger Station.

The miner who survived the fight found his stolen gold, and undecided Silk-Ribbon Sam discovered the bags which had been taken from his stage.

The discovery had a strange effect upon him, and seemed to bring back much that he had forgotten.

Arriving at Danger Station Silk-Ribbon Sam found that another man had taken his stage out in his absence, and heard also that a lady had arrived on the last coach and was awaiting him in his cabin, which had been broken open to give her as the best quarters there.

"A lady to see me?" he said. "Come, Surgeon Powell, I cannot go alone—come, Buffalo Bill."

He seemed fairly frightened, and the scout and the surgeon accompanied him.

As the three splendid-looking men advanced toward the cabin a lady appeared in the door.

She was in a dark traveling-dress, and with a cry that rung out like a bugle Silk-Ribbon Sam sprang toward her.

"Yes, Marmaduke, I have come after you."

The Mad Driver trembled violently. He glanced toward the scout and then at Buffalo Bill, then at the maiden.

"Am I still mad, Surgeon Powell, for it seems I remember now?"

"You are not mad, Sam; you do remember."

"No, no; I am not Sam now, for I do remember—I am Marmaduke Marsden—yes, I remember all now—I have been in a dream."

"But, no! my name is not Marsden! I have no right to that name!"

"It is Marsden, for you have the sole right to it, as I have come to tell you."

"You have been basely, cruelly treated, Marmaduke, and I have the confession from the dying lips of Mrs. Marsden that Mabrey was not your father's son, and it was a plot between them to cheat you out of your inheritance and name."

"Thank God!"

He stood a moment in thought, and then said, in his old, courtly way:

"I forget—Miss Maxwell. These are my friends, William Cody, Chief of Scouts, and Surgeon Powell, of the army."

Such was the introduction, and soon after Buffalo Bill and Powell walked away.

"His reason has returned, Frank, you think?"

"Yes, Bill; he is himself once more. When that beautiful girl has told the story she came here to tell, all will be well."

An hour after Duke Marsden joined the scout and the surgeon.

"Go over and hear what Miss Maxwell has to tell you. I am going after Tips, who is over in my mine."

"The gold it has panned out isn't a bonanza fortune, but it amounts to considerable. I'll make the boys on my run a present of it, and they may get a few thousands more out of it."

"The one who should have half was killed on Red Top, poor child, and I will devote her share to charity in her name, for, gentlemen, I am a millionaire in my own right, and can well afford to do this act of duty and honor."

In the evening Duke Marsden returned from the mine with Tips, whom he made manager of it, for the boys on Silk-Ribbon Sam's run.

The next day, under the escort of Duke Marsden, Kate started East, and stopping in Chicago the brave girl became the wife of the man she so fondly loved.

The neighbors about Mount Vista, of course were delighted to have the old home thrown open and to welcome the heir and his lovely bride, while not a few were glad to learn that Mabrey had gone abroad to reside.

Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell returned to the fort, having added new laurels to their names as heroes, and many a time since have they been guests at Mount Vista, their host being the once famous Mad Driver of the Rocky Mountains, known along the Overland Trail as Silk-Ribbon Sam.

THE END.

The Buffalo Bill Romances.

BUFFALO BILL stories are now "in season." Everybody is talking of him, for everybody, you are told, is in Chicago, where Cody is "a bright particular star," with his huge Wild West Camp—Forum and Arena. The notabilities as well as the masses flock to his headquarters and enjoy his wonderfully varied "show," that is a quick succession of surprises in marvelous feats of horsemanship and marksmanship, and in all-nations parade. Readers may not enjoy all this, for only the privileged few can visit Chicago—those with well-filled purses; but all can enjoy the stories in which Buffalo Bill is the chief actor and "hero."

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From the Newsdealer's Bulletin, May 15, 1893.

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BUFFALO BILL'S CAREER.

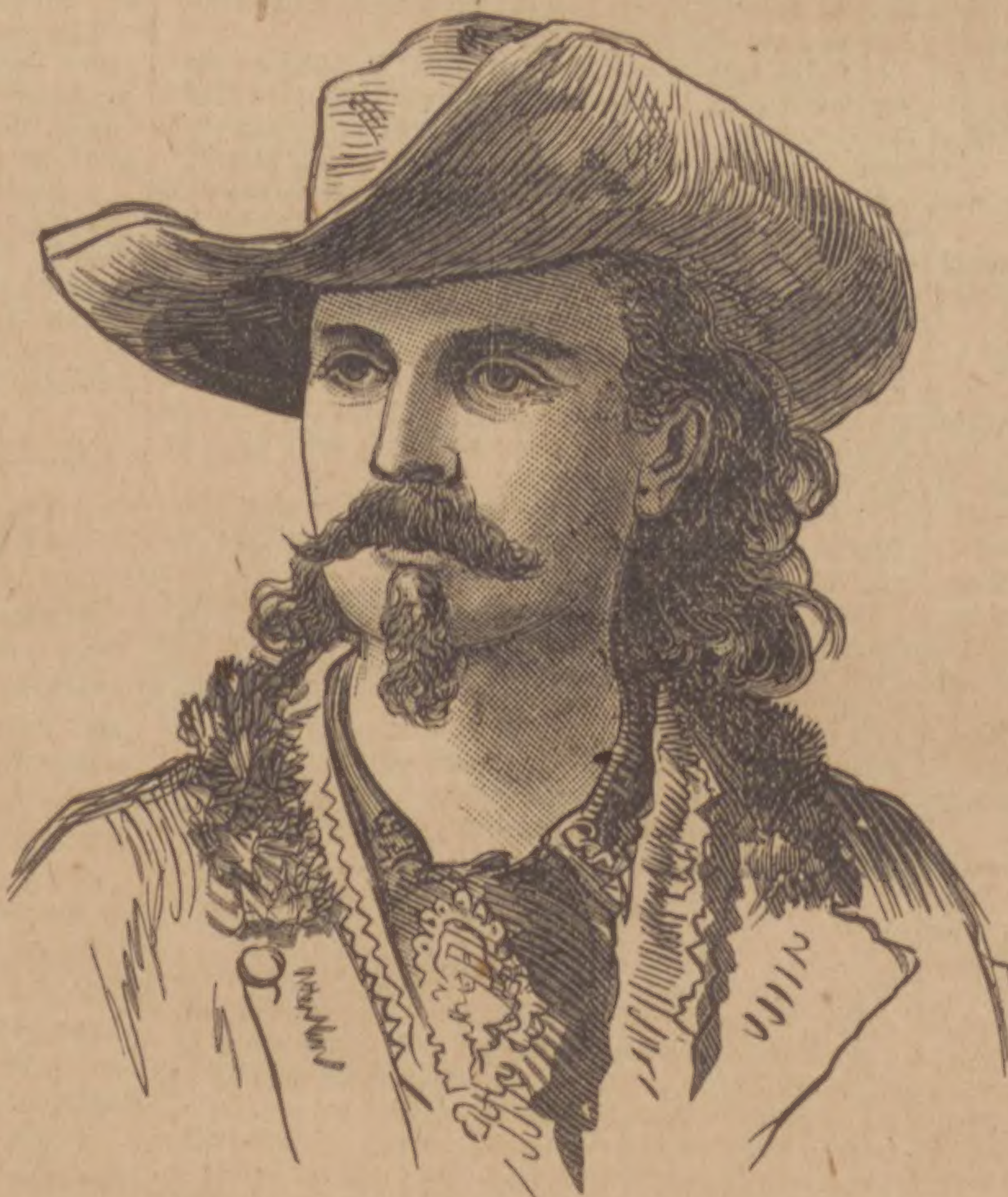
THE career of Buffalo Bill has been, in all respects, remarkable. Probably no living man has seen more life in its most romantic and startling phases, or had a wider range of acquaintance, or has more interested the public in his personal qualities and character.

Coming out of the Wild West when what is now farms, ranches and cattle ranges was the feeding-ground of the buffalo, the home of the untamed Indian, and the haunt of the outlaw—he is, literally, a Child of the Plains—the Knight of the Border—the typical Man of the West.

In early boyhood his father was murdered in the so-called "Kansas war," when ruffians overran Eastern Kansas, and murder, pillage and violence held wild riot. It was then the boy so asserted himself that before he was fifteen years of age, Billy Cody was noted for his nerve, and for his readiness for any dangerous service.

From one daring or arduous performance to another he so progressed in public estimation that when he was eighteen years old he was known from the Missouri to the Red River of Texas as one of the best shots, most expert horsemen, most successful hunters, most daring scouts, most skilled Indian fighters, most sagacious guides, and most fearless Pony Express carrier in all the land.

In such a life the romance writer finds ready-made material; in such a career, acts, and facts, and actualities are but to be reproduced in nar-



BUFFALO BILL.

ative to make a story full of the wildest, keenest, most varied interest. Here is a hero who is no myth, no fiction; and American literature has found in him such a character as gives to it an originality, a virility, that lifts it at once to a new plane.

With his later career the public is familiar. His great WILD WEST SHOW has made his name, in Europe and America, a household word; and now, in Chicago, he will give a crowning glory to his fame by his wonderful Wild West Exhibition, and illustrating in his person, to the assembled millions, the true type of a Representative American Citizen.

It has been the good fortune and the exceeding pleasure of the publishers of this series to place before readers a considerable number of stories of the Wild West, from the pens of writers of national fame, in which Buffalo Bill is the central figure, and in which many of his plains pardas are associated with him—largely real episodes in his strange and exciting life.

It has also been our special good fortune to obtain from Mr. Cody's own hand a considerable number of romances of wilderness life—of army life, of Indian life, of mountain and mining life, of life on the ranges—in all of which we have what is, unquestionably, some of the most unique, interesting and stirring works in American romance literature.

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